



MILTON'S  
**C O M U S**

EDITED WITH

**Text, Introduction and Notes**

BY

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# MILTON

## INTRODUCTION

### I. LIFE OF MILTON

The student of Milton's poetry must needs have a clear idea of the poet's life, for of no other poet could it be more truly affirmed that his poetry is a faithful expression of his personality. Every one of the experiences the poet went through has left its mark on his verse. The more Milton's poems are studied the more do his life and art seem to cohere and to express the essential pride and intensity of his character. He is the most self-conscious among English poets; and like most good poets he is fond not only of bringing "more or less concealed autobiography into his poetry, but still more in his prose works he inclines often to insert long passages about himself, his studies, travels, projects, friends and character."

Milton was born at Cheapside in London in 1608. His father was a scrivener by trade and had by dint of his efforts succeeded in placing his family above want. The elder Milton was a man of considerable culture and hence the attention he paid to the early upbringing of his son was in a way adapted to his latent genius. Even as a lad, Milton was very studious and his father often noting his love of reading "ordered the maid to sit up for him."

He was educated at St. Paul's School which he entered in 1620. In due course he proceeded to Christ's College, Cambridge, in 1625, where he spent seven years of his career. There are many conflicting accounts of the nature of his life at the University, Dr. Johnson, an unsympathetic critic of the poet attributing to him some gross act of misbehaviour, for which he was flogged, others more sympathetically inclined, disbelieving in the tale altogether. Anyway one fact is clear—that at the University Milton continued his studies with zeal and persistence, leading a very stern and retired life, which gained for him the nickname 'Lady of Christ's Church.' He left Cambridge in 1632, his mind well stored

with knowledge of the classics, the Hebrew Literature, as also the literature of the moderns—English, Italian and French.

Before he left the University he had written many poems, all of them imitative and experimental, with nothing absolutely distinctive about them, but yet with promises for the future in them. (Cf. the *Ode on the Death of a Fair Infant*).

Milton returned to his father in 1632, his mind firmly set on the accomplishment of great things in literature. Six years he spent at Horton, apparently idling away his time, but really laying by in his mind such a stock of knowledge as would have cumbered any lesser man than Milton. Milton himself says of "an inward prompting which grows steadily upon me, that by labour and intense study, joined with the strong propensity of Nature, I might perhaps leave something so written to after times as they would not willingly let it die." He had no desire to enter any profession in life—not even the Church. His mind was settled. He would devote his talents as a poet to the writing of a great poem. (Cf. Sonnet on His Blindness or earlier still, that composed on his attaining his 23rd year).

It was during this time of preparation that *L'Allegro*, *Il Penseroso*, *Comus*, *Arcades* and *Lycidas* were written. But he published all his poems only in 1645 and even there he surprisingly enough, included all his early poems, good, bad and indifferent. The value of even his schoolboy exercises to the poet was that they recorded the particular stages in his long and arduous self-education.

*Lycidas* was written in 1637 and in the next year Milton undertook a continental tour to complete his education. He travelled in Italy 16 months, devoting his time to the enjoyment of art, taking part in serious discussions on all subjects and writing Latin and Italian verse so well that he was highly esteemed even in Italy itself. In 1639 he returned to England in haste to help his friends in the political strife that had begun in the country.

1640-60. He threw himself with such enthusiasm into the conflict which had roused all his dormant political and religious ardour, that he forgot temporarily at least his poetic

dreams, which were still unrealized. This was the period of Milton's prose. He wrote bitter prose pamphlets, all controversial in tone and harsh in style. Certainly the poet felt it keenly that he had 'the use only of his left hand' when forced to write such pamphlets, that he was barred from "beholding the bright countenance of truth in the quiet and still air of delightful studies."

During this period he wrote little verse of any kind except the best of his eighteen sonnets. The Sonnets thus bridge over the interval between the poetry of his youth and the greater poetry of the last phase of his life.

In 1643 Milton married Mary Powell, the daughter of a cavalier gentleman. It was an unfortunate alliance and it was only after a series of troubles that the poet could lead a happy married life with his wife. His divorce pamphlets and his misogynistic outbursts in his *Samson Agonistes* certainly received much of their colour from his own experiences. Ten years later he married a second time, his first wife having died in 1653. It was a happy time Milton had till 1658, but his beloved wife dying, he married a third time in 1663, when completely blind, and hence, put to the necessity of relying on others for every small help.

We have slurred over many details in Milton's life which are certainly not significant to our study. His activities in the political struggle were amply rewarded when in 1649 he was appointed as Latin Secretary to the Commonwealth. He wrote learned Latin treatises justifying the execution of Charles I and gained thereby a continental reputation. But such hard work could not be continued for long. Milton's eyesight had long been failing; and in 1654 he became completely blind. The death of the Protector in 1658 and the Restoration in 1660 marked the beginning of the decline in his fortunes. He had to be in hiding for his personal safety. But it was fortunate that the poet was left in peace to accomplish his mission in life, which had been ever present to his mind even when he was fully occupied with other sterner duties. In darkness surrounded with dangers, Milton composed *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*. The first poem was published in 1667; the last two appeared together in 1671, three years before Milton's death in 1674.

## GENERAL &amp; CRITICAL ESSAYS

## II. MILTON AS THE LAST OF THE ELIZABETHANS

Milton stands apart from all the literary movements of his age. The greater part of the 17th century is occupied by the period of the Jacobean dramatists and metaphysical poets. It is a half century of varied production. The self-same period also sees the composition of *Comus*, *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*. It is hard to note in this confusion the continuance of an earlier literary impulse or a new and separate development. The difficulty is all the greater in the case of Milton, whose soul was "like a star and dwelt apart" moving in a world of his own, in an utterly isolated atmosphere.

Nevertheless one can discern a great change in style and sentiment between the earlier poems of Milton and the productions of his later years—between *Comus* and *Samson Agonistes*. It is a vast interval—this one between 1638 and 1671. "But the interval is intra-Miltonic" picturing the gradual flowering of Milton's genius in his attempt towards attaining *classic perfection* in poetry, an ideal unsought and undreamed of by English poetry till that time. This, then, is the essential difference between his later poems and his earlier verse—that while in the latter he is content with representing in fittingly beautiful language, "the common sweetness of the earth, the power to move men's hearts and to bring loveliness into the lives of men," in the former burns with greater force the passion for righteousness guided and impelled by a Puritanic self-consciousness, which makes the poetic style itself hard, metallic and telling.

The 1645 volume of Milton's poems contains side by side with many boyish exercises which the poet seems to have put there without selection, his great *Nativity Ode*, the companion lyrics *L'Allegro*, *Il Penseroso*, *Comus* and *Lycidas*. All of them are very significant and great in themselves, as showing Milton's character, powers, and tastes. They indicate Milton's relation to his contemporaries and predecessors; like most young poets he reflects the general characteristics and the movements around him. They are experiments in different manners and kinds. Milton is in the

great tradition of English poetry, deriving primarily from Spenser, and then from Shakespeare.

One of his very earliest school-boy exercises "On the Death of a Fair Infant" shows Milton as a pupil of Spenser. The long drawn out imagery, the cumbrousness, the general tone of the whole poem—all these are Spenserian. Even the verse form adopted is a very slight modification of the Spenserian stanza. One need only see the opening lines to perceive the quaint elaborate beauty, the occasionally languid music of the whole poem, which are pre-eminently the qualities of Spenser's poetry.

We can also note that Milton thought fit to cast the first outpourings of his verse into the form of the pastoral; and he produced a masterpiece in each kind of the pastoral he attempts. *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* are pastoral Lyrics. *Comus* is a pastoral masque, *Lycidas*, a pastoral elegy. The Pastoral was one of the earliest and best flowers of the Renaissance and the influence of this form on all Elizabethan writers was profound; in itself, a thing of beauty, it gave scope to the poet to depict simple and lovely scenes. The land of the pastoral was a dreamland of ideal beauty and it fascinated the childlike imagination of all Elizabethan poets and dramatists. Even Shakespeare felt its influence and came perilously near to writing a pastoral drama in *As You Like It* and *The Winter's Tale*. Milton strongly felt the force of the tradition and gave it a fitting expression in his earlier verse.

The earlier poetry of Milton is the poetry of beauty, not of supreme gravity or seriousness. Next to Spenser and Keats, Milton is the most sensuous poet in the English language. Like Spenser, Milton worships sheer sensuous beauty. His very earliest poems reveal his love of loveliness and his affection for the world and its inhabitants, which feeling gets blunter and blunter as he progresses. In the autograph Mss. of *Comus* there were 16 lines in the beginning which Milton crossed when revising the poem for publication:

Amidst the Hesperian gardens, on whose banks  
Bedew'd with nectar and celestial songs,  
Eternal roses grow and hyacinth  
And prints of golden rind, on whose fair tree,  
The scaly—harnessed dragon ever keeps  
His unenchanted eye.

Probably the poet thought that they were so overloaded with beauty, that he removed the whole. But here we find fully revealed one of the chief features of Milton's poetry—its appeal to our physical senses, which it holds in common with the poetry of the great Elizabethans.

We can also note the description of the woodland solitude at noon in *Il Penseroso* with its many reminiscences of earlier poets :

Shadows brown, that Sylvan loves,  
Of pine, or monumental oak,  
Where the rude axe with heaved stroke  
Was never heard the Nymphs to daunt  
Or fright them from their hallowed haunt

which carries us on to the loveliest lines in *Paradise Lost*,

In shadier bower,  
More sacred and sequestered, though but feigned,  
Pan or Sylvanus never slept, nor nymph  
Nor faunus haunted.

This quality never died out completely in Milton. The description of the palace of Comus vies with the picture of the Bower of Bliss (in Canto II of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*) in its remarkable loveliness :

Here be all the pleasures  
That fancy can beget on youthful thoughts,  
When the fresh blood grows lively and returns  
Brisk as the April buds in primrose season.

The whole passage deserves a patient study, for it reveals the affinity between the great spokesman of Puritanism in verse and the earlier poets of the Renaissance. The amazing catalogue of flowers in *Lycidas*, which poetry knows and names, is well-known to all who have an instinct for true poetry. Even the great poems of the poet's maturity contain some of the greatest sensuous descriptions in English literature. One easily recalls the description of Eden and its inhabitants, and the coming on of evening. It may seem paradoxical, but the fact is that Milton, though supremely a poet of beauty, is also the poet of the conflicts of life, of which he was keenly conscious as a Puritan. More than any other poem *Lycidas* brings out the force of this remark ; for the passion for beauty and the passion for right which burn in it need no description to a lover of poetry.

All the early poems of Milton afford us an insight into Milton's personality in its two contrasted moods, the sanguine and the buoyant, and the reflective. The very ideas in the poems are expressive of both these characteristics. The happy beginning of *L'Allegro* with its landscape's everlasting freshness of the morning (To hear the lark begin his flight  
 ... Under the hawthorn in the dale) is interesting to us because it describes "the sights and sounds and actions which make up the life it pictures, and cause the pleasure it expresses." There are other lines in the same poem which are significant to our present purpose—those describing the fairies and other supernatural beings of village folklore, or portraying scenes of chivalry. The mood of *Il Penseroso* is no less sensuous than that of *L'Allegro*. Its delights are as aesthetic and as scarcely intellectual.

In the various art-forms Milton adopts, in the different verse-forms he attempts—all with varying degrees of success—he only follows the great tradition of the poetry of the preceding age. He takes up the models of the Elizabethan short lyric, the ode, the masque and the sonnet. But as in Elizabethan poetry the predominant tone in all Milton's poetry is the lyrical. As Mr. Mackail has said: "There is not a square inch of his poetry from first to last of which one could not confidently say, 'This is Milton and no one else'." This probably accounts for the excellence of the lyrics in *Comus*, which are unsurpassed in beauty, by any, even in Elizabethan poetry.

Thus viewed, all the earlier poetry of Milton contained in the 1645 volume is only a record of the particular stages in his long journey towards *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*. We are also told that Milton, as his poems indicate clearly, was no Puritan born: "his sense of beauty and his religious instinct were naturally at one; his practice and his whole training had been in the direct line of conformity." We are tempted to read back the Milton of 1667 into the Milton of 1637. But we forget that the hard, unamiable character of the old man had no root at all in the buoyant temper of the youth.



## III. THE PURITANISM OF MILTON

*Milton's Puritanism.*—Milton was born in the latter part of the reign of King James I, when Puritanism was collecting its strength for the approaching struggle, and his long life coincides with the stern conflict that was waged between Crown and Parliament in the country. He even lived to see his cherished ideals in politics and religion, after a short period of success, completely subverted. Very eventful years they were, and they left their mark on the highly impressionable nature of Milton. His poetry, like his life, is the full and clear expression of that Puritanism which by its narrow sympathies and fanatical zeal and its lofty idealism made the Civil War in the country uncompromising in nature. Milton is the spokesman of Puritanism in verse.

Walter Bagehot in his *Essay on Milton* distinguishes between two kinds of goodness in the world—the sensuous and the ascetic. “The principle of the first class is its sensibility to outward stimulus ; it is moved by all which occurs, stirred by all which happens, open to the influences of whatever it sees, hears or meets with.” Such men may err often, but even then they have an excellence, a charm—the outcome of their common humanity that endears us to them. Directly opposed to this is the type of ascetic goodness which secludes a man as in a natural monastery. It gives men an isolated excellence and forces them to walk through life with “an abstinence from sense, a zeal of morality, a purity of ideal, which other men have not.”

The character of the latter type of goodness is distinctly embodied in Milton. In poetry as in life, Milton governs himself by a rigorous code of moral principles, which give their characteristic quality to the poet and the man. To the student of Milton's poetry it is not of much use—an examination of the details of Milton's political career as exhibiting his Puritanic zeal. He finds the same zeal expressed in almost every one of his singular descriptions of himself—“of those striking passages which are scattered through all his works and which add to whatever interest may belong to them intrinsically as one of the rarest of artistic charms,

that of magnanimous biography." Quite early in life he feels compelled to dedicate 'the talents lodged with him' to the service of his Maker; he lives 'as ever under his *Taskmaster's* eye.' Such a consciousness, approaching the verge of morbidity of temper, we may say, lies at the root of the prolonged education and the severe training he underwent for years continuously. "He laid out his task as though he had eternity before him." Milton himself says, "And long it was not after when I was confirmed in this opinion, that he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem; that is, a composition and pattern of the best and honourablest things."

Thus Milton starts his poetic career with the determination that he will not be tried by any standard but the highest. In the curious Preface to the 1645 volume of his poems, in its challenging note, we seem to hear Milton's own voice. "In the sphere of art, as in the sphere of political and religious life, he represents individualism carried to the highest point."

It is this moral tenacity of Milton that gives its characteristic strength to his verse. There is a solemn and firm music in the lines of *Paradise Lost* and the spirit of the great writer seems to be moving on every page. All his poems with the exception of only a few lyrics of his early years are the outcome of noble strength on fire. The strain of this passion, vehement and dangerous, informs and penetrates some of the grandest flights of Milton's genius. The burst of half-intelligible discord in the speech of the Pilot of the Galilean Lake might baffle and trouble readers, but properly speaking nothing in the poem is more significant.

Prof. Masson states that 'the sublime notion and high mystery' of a disciplined life is 'the Miltonic idea.' That is undoubtedly the informing idea in *Comus*, which 'teaches the doctrine nearest to his heart, namely, sobriety of life.' But one cannot help remarking that when the poet is over-conscious of his function in life and ideals in poetry as a Puritan, he becomes comparatively dull. The Elder Brother and the Sister in Milton's masque are pale personifications

of virtue, droning out long-drawn-out praises of chastity and condemnation of its opposite, by the side of the supremely interesting enchanter Comus, who is designed as a monster, but who in reality is more human than his saintly opponents. The difference may be noted even in his verse on these different occasions.

Milton's puritanism accounts probably for the two defects which are exceedingly rare in great English authors—a deficiency in humour and a deficiency in a knowledge of plain human nature. His fellow feeling for ordinary human nature is so weak, that on this ground alone, his inferiority to Shakespeare may be said to rest. "Milton's art is always serious, was never more serious," than in his *Samson Agonistes*. "His Samson is not the incarnation of physical strength which the popular fancy embodies in the character. Samson has become a Puritan; the observations he makes would have done credit to a religious pikeman in Cromwell's army." The degree to which the humorous element is absent in Milton's nature can be understood by a reference to the Paradise of Fools in *Paradise Lost*, the one sad and vain attempt at humour in the whole epic.

Generally, such serious-minded people like Milton are obtuse to the "mighty world of the eye and the ear." But Milton had every opportunity of entering into that world and of even appreciating its loveliness and charm. "The austerity of his nature was perhaps not caused by the deficiency of his senses, but by an excess of the warning instinct." Thus we find a paradox in literature, that a poet neither amiable, nor sympathetic to the ordinary frailties of human nature is yet keenly conscious of the beauty of the world and life in it. The most austere poet in English literature is also the most sensuous. The epic which attempts "to justify the ways of God to man" contains some of the best descriptive passages in English poetry. The evening in the Garden of Eden and the life of the first man and the first woman in the garden are well-known to all lovers of true poetry. "Milton's words, we may say, are like his character. There is the same austerity in the real essence, the same exquisiteness of sense, the same delicacy of form which we know that he had, the same music which we imagine

there was in his voice. In both his character and his poetry there was an ascetic nature in a sheath of beauty."

#### IV. THE CLASSICISM OF MILTON

Milton is right through from beginning to end a classicist. His mind is fully impregnated with the classics. Hence not only things and images, but also words and phrases are charged with classical borrowings and associations. His is not the mere stupid imitation of ancient Greek and Latin poets. In him one might well say that the classical movement attained a perfect expression in English poetry. The classical world is just another Nature to Milton. Hence the poet uses not only the language but the very organs of the classics. He sees and represents the world under the terms of ancient classical art. De Quincy remarks truly that, to Milton the gods and goddesses of the Heathens were not "mere poetical properties." His mind was so full of classical reminiscences that, "borrowing from the classics was just like borrowing from Nature, both were equally beautiful and familiar. It was not at least to the poet a blending of the real and the unreal, and probably he even felt that he was only employing his imagination to make a revelation of truth which he himself entirely believed."

Thus in his very first Ode on Christ's Nativity, Christ becomes Pan. The Ode also reveals how the ancient pagan world appeals to him with such moving beauty that he is loath to leave it. As extraordinarily classical are his *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* in atmosphere and reminiscence. With remarkable naturalness Milton's descriptions pass from English landscape to the pastoral or classical world. He sees the world and its beauty through literature, romantic and classical, but as if directly with his eyes, and clearly. (Cf. the Lines on the Lark in *L'Allegro*, Stanzas on Pan in the *Nativity Ode*). Thus, there is no artificiality in the classicism of Milton. It was only the natural medium through which he looked at the world.

We find in *Comus* abundant traces of Milton's intense study of the literature of antiquity. Milton is very allusive, and often he glances at a legend or detail of some kind with-

out even naming it expressly. Cf. ll. 341—"Our star of Arcady"; "that Nepenthes, which the wife of Thone In Egypt gave to Jove-born Helena"; "The Carpathian wizard's work." A certain critic remarks in the *Quarterly Review*: "It would not be too much to say that the literature of antiquity was to Milton's genius what soil and light are to a plant. It nourished, it coloured, it developed it. It determined not merely his character as an artist, but it exercised an influence on his intellect and temper scarcely less powerful than hereditary instincts and contemporary history. It at once animated and chastened his imagination; it modified his fancy; it furnished him with his models. On it his taste was formed; on it his style was moulded. From it his diction and his method derived their peculiarities. It transformed what would in all probability have been the mere counterpart of Caedmon's Paraphrase or Langland's Vision into *Paradise Lost*; and what would have been the mere counterpart of Corydon's Doleful knell and the satire of the Three Estates, into *Lycidas* and *Comus*."

## V. COMUS

### **Circumstances and date of publication**

The masque *Comus* was first represented at Ludlow Castle in September 29th, 1634; and we can suppose that it was composed early in the same year. The occasion was this: some time back Milton had written *Arcades* in honour of Alice, the Countess Dowager of Derby. She married Sir Thomas Egerton, whose son by his former marriage, Sir John Egerton married the daughter of the Countess of Derby. Sir John Egerton became the Earl of Bridgewater, 'a noble peer of mickle trust and charm,' and in 1631 was made President of the Council of Wales. Some reasons delayed the Earl's formal entry on his duties till 1634. Late in 1634 he went to take charge of his new office to his official seat of Ludlow Castle. \* It was here, on Michaelmas night, September 29, that *Comus* was acted.

Milton's musical tastes had made him the intimate friend of Lawes, the most famous composer in England. Lawes had been asked to furnish the music for the festivities

at Ludlow Castle, and he turned to Milton for help. Milton wrote the words and Lawes set the piece to music and himself took the parts of the Spirit and Thyrsis. It is a strange phenomenon in English literature that a severely Puritan poet should have written a cavalier masque. But Milton makes *Comus* as far as possible the vehicle of his Puritan sentiments.

The masque was first published anonymously. Milton himself was not quite certain of the expediency of printing the volume. He writes in the following strain as if he is sorry for having consented to the publication: "Alas! what have I been about in my folly! On my flowers I have let in the sirocco (i.e., the hot south-east wind), infatuate as I am." One discerning critic of the day, however, Sir Henry Wotton, immediately wrote to Milton complimenting the poet on his successful composition: "Since your going, you have charged me with new obligations, both for a very kind letter from you, dated the sixth of this month, and for a dainty piece of entertainment which came therewith. Wherein I should much commend the tragical part, if the lyrical did not ravish me with a certain Doric delicacy in your songs and odes, where unto I must plainly confess to have seen yet nothing parallel in our language: *ipsa mollities*." This is very apt praise, though it does not fully define the superiority of *Comus* to other masques of the time.

### Sources of *Comus*

As we have stated elsewhere, it will be a mistake to insist overmuch on Milton's debt to his predecessors in regard to the story in *Comus*. The various strands in the story are taken from various sources, but this originality is seen as Prof. Courthope remarks, in the skill with which he blends all the different episodes into one whole, the interest of which is not broken by a single irrelevance. Still it is essential that we estimate the extent of Milton's indebtedness.

It is suggested that Milton's poem was based on a tradition that the Lady and the Brothers played truant and lost themselves in a wood near Ludlow. It is equally probable that this tale arose out of the poem itself.

The origin for the main story—of the sister entrapped by the magician and of the brothers rescuing her has been found in George Peele's *Old Wives' Tales*, 1595. In this play, which is more an incoherent idyll than a drama, two brothers seek to rescue a lost sister whom a wizard has enchanted ; but they themselves are laid under a spell and are eventually rescued by a wandering knight and lover of the lady, Enmerrides by name, who breaks the wizard's symbols (a wreath, a sword, and a 'light in a viat') and so frees the lady and her brothers.

Mr. Joseph Jacobs in his *English Fairy Tales* finds traces in Milton's *Comus* of the old folk-tale of Childe Rowland. In one version of this story Childe Rowland is the youngest of three brothers ; he goes to rescue his two brothers and his sister from the 'dark tower' where an enchanter holds them captive. "Two traits, the refusal of the Childe, like Milton's Lady, to touch the enchanted food, and the sister's release by a liquid applied to her lips and finger-tips, connect this tale with *Comus* : and on the whole the conclusion is not rash that Milton took hints from some contemporary form of the myth."

It is in the creation of the central character of the piece, Comus, that all Milton's literary reminiscences are in evidence. That the name Comus, the poet takes from classical writers, where Comus signifies 'revel' or 'revelling-band', cannot be denied. There are descriptions of Comus in writers like Philostratus which Milton might have remembered. "More definite however is the picture drawn by Ben Jonson in the *Masque of Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* (1619). Comus is a character in that masque and described as

The founder of taste,  
For fresh meats, or powdered, or pickle or paste ;  
Devourer of boiled, baked, roasted or sod ;  
An emptier of cups.

Obviously this sordid power of dull, 'lust-dieted' appetite has not very much in common with Milton's blithe, caressing personification of pleasure, so fatal because outwardly so beautiful." In this respect Milton probably follows the Latin play of the Dutch Professor Putten, entitled *Comus*.

It is a significant fact that this play was re-issued at Oxford in 1634. Milton's character is sensual without being gross. Also, by making Comus the son of Bacchus, the poet was able to put on his lips "all that love of the poetry of the senses, which belongs to the classic conception of the god, and which Milton here represents as the subtlest of temptations to Virtue."

Milton lays a vast range of authors under contribution in his play. Most important of these are Homer and Ovid. The magical powers attributed to *Comus* in the masque owe much to the Circe story in the *Odyssey*. It is also certain that the description of Acrasia's Bower of Bliss in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, Bk. II has largely contributed to Milton's picture of the palace of Comus.

The motive of transformation, which is fully worked out in the incidents of Comus' palace, and in many minor instances also, can be 'traced to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.'

For traces of other classical writers in the play, such as Plato, Virgil &c., the student may refer to the textual notes.

In all these cases the most noteworthy fact is that Milton treats the classical and other tales with utmost freedom. "He feels, and justly, that he has the same right as the great poets of antiquity had to mould all legends to his own poetic purpose. This is his deliberate practice, and is accompanied by full knowledge of what he is altering."

For the legend of the river-goddess Sabrina, Milton's original source was of course the History of Geoffrey of Monmouth. But here the influence of Fletcher's pastoral drama—The Faithful Shepherdess—on Milton is very clear. The motive of Fletcher's play is similar to that of *Comus*. "Speaking briefly we may say that the last 200 lines of *Comus*—the disenchantment scene—betray in the conception of the nymph Sabrina, in the incidents, and the lyric movement, the spell which Fletcher's genius exercised on Milton." Milton introduced the Sabrina story probably because it suited well the scene and setting of his masque.

Besides all these motives, we can find in the play a vast number of words and phrases which are suggested by, and even taken from the writings of classic or other poets.



"The more Milton is studied, the larger do we find his debt in these matters, and the greater his power of stamping with his own seal all that he borrows."

## VI. THE ENGLISH MASQUE

The sixteenth century was the period of the masque in English literature. The origin of the masque has been traced to Italy. Hall in his *Chronicle* makes mention of this novel form of entertainment introduced into England in 1512 "after the manner of Italic." We need not however take this to mean anything more than that the Italian Fashion was adopted in some details of costume or scenery, for similar entertainments seem to have been popular even in the time of Edward III, where royal personages were entertained with dumb-shows and dancing. It would be proper therefore to regard the masque as "a flower of Italian culture, but grafted on an English term of the same family."

The masque started first as a dance of masked actors, or rather a sequence of dances. The dance was supposed to illustrate some story and in course of time allegorical characters were introduced to expound the purport of the whole device. Songs also were introduced between the dances, which gave the performers a time of needed rest and of stimulating them to new efforts. The whole performance was set in a framework of splendid decoration.

The masque was essentially an aristocratic form of art. The cultivated audience who attended it would feel flattered by the learned allusions in the work and its ingenious allegorical device. Prof. Dowden remarks: "It was desirable to dignify in every possible way the silent dancers and this, which could not be attained by the exposition of character, might be effected by imaginative invention, or by an allegory which should present them as symbolising some of those invisible powers of morals or wisdom or beauty or love which preside over human life. The whole device must be joyous; yet it might have a certain seriousness of beauty, it might admit of lofty thoughts, but not of tragic emotions. Its ideal was one of grace rather than of greatness."

The masque was an occasional form of composition.

The poet exercised his powers not to embody the visions of his imagination but to satisfy the demand made by some exalted personage to whom he looked for patronage and support. The exact nature of the occasion always determined the direction in which the poet's fancy must play. It was inevitable that there should be in the piece courtly compliments and learned allusions. Cf. the following lines from *The Maid's Tragedy* :

They must commend their king and speak in praise  
Of the assembly ; bless the bride and bridegroom  
In person of some god. They are tied to rules  
Of flattery.

The skill of a writer of masques does not lie in exercising his imaginative capacity to the fullest extent, but in adopting his genius to the occasion and in enhancing the splendour of the entertainment.

It was also essential that the masque should embody a central idea so that it might not 'flicker down to brainless pantomime.' This ideal element in the masque was to the true poet its most important feature, since it acted more or less as a counterpoise to the spectacle and the material splendours of the piece. "The harmonising of spectacle and idea was often effected by something of the nature of symbol or allegory."

The anti-masque was a general feature of the masque, serving as a grotesque or humorous foil to the beauty of the piece ; there could also be a succession of antimasques. In Jonson's 'Masque of Queens' the illustrious queens of history were the masques ; in the anti-masque appeared twelve hags or witches representing the powers that are hostile to good fame. All were dressed in garments and bore instruments appropriate to sorcery.

The poet contributed to the masque speech in prose or verse for dramatic delivery, and also the songs. "Thus the masque united a dramatic element, exhibiting itself in speech and action, with a lyrical element, expressing itself in song and the music of violins or wind instruments. The dance might be conceived as an ecstasy or rapture, arising out of the joy in action, speech, and song, too fine for utterance in words." But the poet's part in the performance was,

compared to its other aspects, very slight : very often, to the disgust of discerning poets like Ben Jonson the spectacle overpowered the poetry. Daniel in his preface to the *Masque of Tethys* declared that in the masque "the only life consists in show, the art and invention of the architect gives the greatest graces, and is of the most importance."

The Jacobean age was the period when the masque was most popular. But the costly nature of the entertainment made it impossible for it to continue long. Also the masques were frivolous toys, and they could not but perish when courtiers had to doff off their silks and buckle on their armour. Mark Pattison remarks : "The taste for grotesque pageant in the open air must have gradually died out before the general advance of refinement.....But it often happens that when a taste or fashion is at the point of death it undergoes a forced and temporary revival. So it was with the masque. In 1633, the Puritan hatred to the theatre had blazed out in Prynne's *Histriomastix*, and as a natural consequence, the loyal and cavalier portion of society threw itself into dramatic amusements of every kind. It was an unreal revival of the masque, stimulated by political passion, in the wane of genuine taste for the fantastic and semi-barbarous pageant, in which the former age had delighted."

## VII. COMUS AS A MASQUE

The masque is primarily a spectacle. Music is a part of it. In it the words are but of secondary importance. Sufficient scope is given in the Masque to singing and dancing. The vogue of the Masque in English literature is at its highest point in the Elizabethan period and in the early years of the Jacobean age. It was most popular during the reign of James I. Then it would appear that the type had progressed from its simple form as a *masquerade* into a complicated form of entertainment scarcely distinguishable from the opera. It is, however, curious that in the hands of the great Elizabethan dramatists the Masque underwent a transformation which takes it often to the realms of great poetry. The Masques of Ben Jonson or those of Shakespeare (interludes though they are) lay more stress on words than on mere

costly external extravagance. The current of Puritanism, which was gradually sweeping over the whole land, could not tolerate such a pastime and the masque died out as all other forms of the theatrical entertainments as a consequence of the Puritan hatred which blazed out in 1633 in Prynne's *Histriomastix*.

*Comus* is more than a masque. It retains, it is true, the characteristics of the literary type to which it belongs. The proper province for the Masque-writer is where his fancy can play unconfined, a land where truth and realism rarely enter. Idealization is its first principle: The scene is earth; a wild wood—but it becomes a dim spot. Before the starry threshold of Jove's Court

.....where those immortal shapes  
Of bright aerial spirits live insphered  
In regions mild of calm and serene air,

the scene of action is the haunt of wicked enchanters and good angels by whose side, even the benighted mortals in the story seem to be pale abstractions of humanity. It is a place fit for all wonderful occurrences, so much so, proceeding with the story one does not feel anything incredible about the magical powers of *Comus* or about the appearance of *Sabrina* and her water-nymphs. The world of '*Comus*' is a wonder-world which we cannot understand.

In such a setting it will be unreasonable for us to expect anything like probability of story or consistent and realistic portrayal of characters. The story in *Comus* is of a piece with the general background—as wildly improbable and as strangely wonderful: A girl with her two brothers, all benighted in a vast forest, falling into the hands of a wicked enchanter when her brothers have gone to fetch her water, and at last rescued in time by the brothers who act under the guidance of a good spirit of the woods. The supernatural machinery is the life of the whole tale and without it the story cannot proceed further than its first stage. Dr. Johnson, in his analysis of the plot, enumerates the gross improbabilities in the tale. Regarding one particular portion he says: "There descends the Spirit in the form of a shepherd; and the Brother, instead of being in haste to ask his help, praise his singing and inquires his business in that place."

It is remarkable, that at this interview the Brother is taken with a short fit of rhyming. The Spirit relates that the Lady is in the power of Comus; the Brother moralizes again. And the Spirit makes a long narration of no use because it is false, and therefore unsuitable to a good being."

The figures too in the masque are so colourless (with the one exception of Comus himself) that one might well think of them as personifications of abstract qualities—a feature much affected by all masques in general. "The young English gentlemen cast off their identity and individuality and appear in the elementary shapes of 'first brother' and 'second brother.' The Lady Alice rises into an ideal impersonation of virgin strength and virtue. The real incident from which the masque is said to have originated disengages itself in the imagination of Milton, from the world of actual occurrences and becomes an occasion for the dramatic play of his own poetical abstractions."

As we have noted, the masque is a light form of dramatic entertainment and cannot be over-weighted with any serious moral idea. "Magnificent in itself and intensely interesting as a revelation of Milton's character and of his relation towards the peculiar religious and social conditions of the age," the lofty strain of moralizing in *Comus* is entirely out of place in it. It is quite unsuited to the occasion and to the characters. Such obtrusive moralizing is alien to the spirit of a fanciful masque and its festive associations. Its introduction may be due to Milton's lack of humour and a consequent absence of a sense of the incongruous. "But this didactic element reveals Milton and that at a point of special interest in his career."

Thus it would be best to regard *Comus* as a poem, which evades the formal laws of the courtly toy. One can note that Henry Lawes, in his dedicatory epistle, calls it "This Poem." Compare *Comus* with anyone of Jonson's masques and we can see the difference. We may, if we like, regard the enchanter's rout of monsters bearing torches as the anti-masque. "But there is no company of masquers, no dancing the entry, no main dance, no 'taking of the ladies' or gentlemen, no revels; song and spectacle are subordinate to a

noble poetical celebration of virgin chastity" (Dowden). Soergel well points out how the subject would have been handled by Jonson: "Jonson would have represented the Lady as virtue in the power of Comus: the latter would have summoned his crew of monsters as an anti-masquer, in order to display his magic art to virtue. The Brothers with other young nobles would have appeared as masquers representing the servants of virtue, and by their sudden entrance have put to flight Comus and his crew. Then the dances of the masquers and the usual songs of a complimentary nature would have brought the performance to a close."

*Comus* gives us a series of pictures of the beauty of the world. It is not a Puritan tract, but an appealing poem. The central figure in it is not a Puritan representation of the monster of vice. Note the speech of the Lady when she is alone in the darkness of the wood. ("They left then when the gray hooded even" etc. l. 280 etc.) She displays no fear. She talks beautiful poetry. Comus talks of 'divine enchantment.' "The beauty is spread all over the poem, not merely in praise of virtue and it is quite in conformity with the festive tone of a masque. The appeal of the masque lies in its melody of style and its richness of imagery. Nor is there any poem in the language where beauties of thought, diction and description spring up more thickly than in *Comus*."

The general tone of *Comus* is most clearly seen in the charming lyrics scattered throughout. Their Doric delicacy appealed to Sir Henry Wotton even more than the serious part of the story and Milton is seen here at his very best, for he is "discharged from the labour of writing two incongruous styles" and he is free 'to indulge his choral raptures without reserve.' 'We cannot appreciate the charm of the lyrics as well as probably the first audience that witnessed *Comus* were able to help by the music of Lawes. But the music of the words certainly appeals to us with its spell of words and its charming imagery. Cf. the song to "Sweet Echo":

"By slow Meander's margent green,  
.....  
.....mourneth well."

We in the modern day can attempt only a literary criticism of Milton's masque. For the exact external settings

which helped its effect on the occasion of its first staging are lost to us. We can nevertheless appreciate the lighter festive note to which Milton turned his muse here. It is the poet of *L'Allegro* once again asserting himself ; and *Comus* comes to an end with Lawes' music ringing through the hall.

### VIII. THE ALLEGORY IN *COMUS*

(a) THE DIDACTIC ELEMENT. The Attendant Spirit in the Epilogue to the Masque says in praise of virtue,

"Mortals, that would follow me  
Love Virtue : she alone is free ;  
She can teach ye how to climb  
Higher than the sphery chime."

This lofty strain of moralizing runs through the whole masque, informing and penetrating even the delineation of the leading characters in it. *Comus* is certainly an instance of fanciful allegory subordinated to the purposes of the masque. It is only natural that Milton chose to make this, his most ambitious poetic attempt of his early years, the medium for the expression of his cherished ideals in religion and politics. Parallels can be discovered in the characters and situations in *Comus* to the leading personages in the state at the time and to some incidents affecting the Church, which created an unrest in all Puritans and in Milton in particular. More important, however, to the student is the general didactic tone of the whole composition, 'the sublime notion and high mystery' of a disciplined-life expressed often in high-flown commonplace, which makes the whole masque in consequence 'tediously instructive.'

Stopford Brooke remarks : "*Comus* is a poem to the glory and the victory of virtue—the mastery of the righteous will over the appetite." It is evident in the solemn moralizings of the Elder Brother and of the Lady. The story itself represents the series of trials and dangers to which moral purity is exposed and the ultimate victory which the good principle gains in the souls of well-disciplined individuals who rely for support in the grace of God.

"And wisdom's self  
Oft seeks to sweet retired solitude ;  
Where, with her best nurse, contemplation,

She plumes her feathers and lets grow her wings,  
That in the various bustle of resort  
Were all-too ruffled, and sometimes impaired."

Thus interpreted, Comus, the son of Bacchus and Circe, is the 'inheritor of two-fold vice'. He is represented as the embodiment of carnal passions, of sensual self-indulgence, and has of course the power to charm the judgments of weak, susceptible natures. The Lady herself regards him as a dangerous opponent, as a "juggler" whose words have a seductive charm about them. Over against Comus stands the Lady, apparently weaker than the enchanter, but in reality stronger than him, because her heart is pure. The juggling practice of Comus has no effect on the fearless and clear-sighted Lady whom he seeks to tempt. Her great speech in praise of temperance seems but a record of passages in Milton's own spiritual history. The two brothers, one rational and naturally afraid of the potent charms of Comus, the other calm and confident of the greater power of Chastity, are only pale abstractions in the story representing the conflicts in all human natures between scepticism and blind faith in a Supreme Providence, Sabrina is there to indicate how if virtue were feeble, "Heaven itself would stoop to her." She represents Divine Grace which has to be invoked to aid the endeavour of mortals in their struggle against vice and temptation. Every situation in the story can be fitted properly into this allegorical scheme, even the story of the victims of Comus, which illustrates only the frailty of human nature and its willingness to lead a godless life of self-indulgence. Indeed "Comus is the work of a youthful spirit, enamoured of its ideals of beauty and of virtue, zealous to exhibit the identity of moral loveliness with moral severity."

But the morality of *Comus* is bald and unconvincing. It is really curious that in a poem obviously intended as a glorification of asceticism and temperance, the best of the argument should appear to be on the opposite side and Comus appeals to us more, with his greater humanity, his better sense of humour, and above all, with his appreciation of the world and its loveliness. Note the speech of Comus where he inveighs against the narrow vision of men who praise 'the lean and sallow Abstinence.'



" Wherefore did Nature pour her bounties forth  
 With such a full and unwithdrawing hand,  
 Covering the earth with odours, fruits, and flocks,  
 Thronging the seas with spawn innumerable  
 But all to please and sate the curious taste ? "

Milton's morals ' take no dangerous hold on the fancy.' The fact is that Milton when he wrote his *Comus* is true to his past and is still ' engaged on the side of liberal manners.' The masque is the work of a scholar and an idealist and, has consequently a touch of pedantry about it. (Note that except *Comus*, no other character is given a definite name in the story, and ' *Comus* ' itself has a significance—vide notes.)

(b) THE POLITICAL ALLEGORY. The year when *Comus* was composed (1634) was marked by widespread political discontent in the country. The King had become more high-handed in his policy, he had suspended Parliament and he was flouting public opinion in his dealings with the Church and the State. Milton's indignation against the existing corruptions in the Government and the Court of the King finds expression in this masque. " In *Comus* the wild license of Court Society is set over against the grave and temperate virtues of a Puritan's life."

The struggle between *Comus* and the Lady is emblematic of the war between the forces of good and evil in the country. *Comus* with his disorderly rout, disturbing the stillness of the woods at night ' with barbarous dissonance ' represents the King and his Courtiers disturbing the peace of the country, by their loose lives and looser talk. The Elder Brother is bringing forward much the same arguments which the Puritans used against the reckless Cavaliers of the time. Or, as R. C. Browne remarks, the masque may have had particular reference to the state of the Church at the time and to the policy of Archbishop Laud. Considering the speech of St. Peter in the later poem *Lycidas*, written in 1638, this view does not seem without any justification. Browne explains the reference saying : " The Court with its lax morality and reckless luxury was the natural ally of the gorgeous ritual and ecclesiastical tyranny associated with the name of Archbishop Laud and his High Church party. The quaint dress and showy strictures of *Comus* represent the forms and

elements of ritualism, the surplices and hoods and head-dresses, the stained windows, the imposing churches, the fantastic music, all the trumpery and the devices by which the sensuous eye is dazzled." But reformation is possible, if only the country (to Milton it meant the Puritan party) would not lose hope, but relying on their essential purity and on the grace of God continue an uncompromising struggle with the depraved clergy of the time. All the references in the masque which are veiled, become more definite in the next poem, where Milton's irrepressible wrath bursts forth in a dread denunciatory voice and "foretells the ruin of the corrupted clergy then at their height."

Thus the story of *Comus* is a veiled presentment of the tragedy which was overtaking the country. Milton saw in *Comus* the image of many things—of England lured away by the seductions of the Catholic Church, of the Puritan cause overwhelmed by the Cavaliers, of himself as the only voice summoning his country to realize its errors, before it would be too late. Thus the masque became the vehicle of his bitter grief and indignation over the apostasy of his beloved country. But it is not bitter grief alone that finds expression in it. It is also a prophecy of sweeping changes which would remove all existing defects. It is a proclamation of Milton's firm faith in the ultimate triumph of righteousness, which finds lofty expression years after in his *Samson Agonistes*.

*Comus* marks a definite stage in Milton's life when he is at the parting of the ways. From very early days he has been going through all the troubles of a mental conflict between two ideals directly opposed to each other. Even here he would disguise his feelings and soften them down; but in *Lycidas* he lays aside all disguises and gives full expression to his patriotic passion and religious ardour.

## IX. THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENT IN *COMUS*

Milton's personality can be easily understood from his poetry—stern, serious-minded, uncompromising, nobly intolerant of vices and corruptions, passionately fond of liberty, devout, pious and with a lofty conception of man's duties

and functions. As we read his poems, we know how he looked at life, what he found in it worthy of his admiration. We observe how the world of experience impressed him and how he interpreted it according to his own ideals. We become familiar with his character and outlook, with his very accent, his passionate fervour in the cause of liberty and conscience. Of no English poet can it be more truly said that his art is "life seen through a temperament."

*Samson Agonistes* is the literary embodiment of Milton's personality as a physical entity in a stage of decadence and disappointment, while in *Comus* we find the poet hoping for the ultimate Benevolence of Providence and believing in the innate virtue of man. The moralizings in *Comus*, however out of place in a masque, are interesting as a revelation of Milton's character and of his relation to the peculiar religious and social conditions of the age. This masque teaches the doctrine nearest to his heart *viz.*, Sobriety of Life. He shows his nice regard for "whatsoever things are fair and of good report." The strong vein of asceticism in his nature is at the root of the praises bestowed on the 'cloistered virtue' of Abstinence. *Comus* is the expression of Milton's youthful ideal as a Puritan. But the passion for beauty burns in Milton as fiercely as does the passion for righteousness; and his regard for beauty in the forms of the world and in human nature informs some of the most poetic passages and all the lyrics in the masque. (Cf. the delineation of Comus, his speeches etc.)

We can proceed a step further and note in *Comus* references to details in Milton's private life itself. The heroine in the story is Milton himself; and can we not see in the impassioned outbursts of the Lady and the charming eloquence of the tempter a record of the temptations which the poet himself had to overcome, tender reminiscences of which still haunted his mind when he composed the masque? With great sternness and certainly with much regret he puts away all things which make life precious. He puts away the common sweetness of the earth, the power to bring loveliness into human lives. The story in *Comus* is Milton's own spiritual history. "Milton admired the Lady as he admired the ideal which he projected before him of himself."

A fair knowledge of Milton's life and character can make us understand that Milton speaks every word in the poem. The doctrine of the magical power of chastity is as much Milton's own guiding principle in life, as is the feeling about the full use of earth's natural resources. "*Comus* expresses the appeal to the senses that Milton himself has felt."

## X. THE LYRICS IN *COMUS*

Dr. Johnson says, in the course of his remarks on *Comus* : "The songs are vigorous and full of imagery ; but they are harsh in their diction and not very musical in their numbers." This may appear strange to us in the modern day, but it is the expression of Dr. Johnson's sincere difficulty to understand, much less appreciate, the melody of these Lyrics, himself being trained to love the smooth flowing couplets of Pope. The art of Milton is seen here at its best, and these short songs contribute to heighten the festive and happy tone of the whole Masque.

*Comus* sings the first song inviting his comrades to join him in midnight shout and revelry and "beat the ground in a light fantastic round." The second song addressed to the Echo, with its "divine enchanting ravishment" naturally appeals to the sensitive nature of *Comus*. His praise is just the proper one to the song and cannot be bettered—"These raptures move the vocal air." "How sweetly they float upon the wings of silence." Quite fittingly the whole masque concludes with the unapproachable song invoking Sabrina and her song in reply.

A full analysis of all the songs is not necessary to indicate to us the fastidious care with which Milton has selected his epithets and the richness of his imagery. The song to 'Sweet Echo' takes us to "the slow Meander's margent green", reminds us of the story of the love-lorn nightingale and incidentally refers to the tale of Narcissus. Insensibly though, the reader's mind wanders to the ancient classical world, remembering many old, happy far-off things with recollected pleasure. Note the phrases themselves which, according to Archbishop Trench, are 'poems in miniature'—Milton chooses his words chiefly for their emotional values.

The skulful use of alliteration which adds to the melody of the song, the splendid play of vocalic sounds, the significance of which for poetry Milton seems to have understood, are but mechanical devices and belong to the stock in trade of all great poets. The result is "a song of such astonishing music that one wonders whether Lawes himself for whom the whole was written could touch it without injury."

It is the same with all Lyrics in *Comus*. Their style is so fanciful, so tender and so full of romantic suggestion that they form the chief beauty of the masque. It is a combination of melody, and style, with richness of imagery that makes the songs so perfectly charming. No wonder Sir Henry Wotton remarked: "I should much commend the tragical part, if the lyrical did not ravish me with a certain Doric delicacy in your songs and Odes—*Ipsa Mollities*."

The technique of the Lyrics is as elaborate and as perfect. There is a free use of imperfect rhymes. *e.g.*, in the Echo song there are four consecutive pairs of irregular rhyme. None the less it is beautiful and we watch its movement as if it were a beautiful theme elaborately and intricately worked out in music. It is Art vying with Nature in making the Lyrics perfect.

What we most demand in Lyric verse—true melody—we get here. Their excellence need no longer be a matter of dispute. "In them Milton achieves a style of quintessential beauty, reminding us with Wordsworth that poetry is primarily a matter of inspiration, and proving like Gray, that it must also be a matter of art."

## XI. CHARACTER OF COMUS

Comus is the hero of the story. He is made the most interesting figure in a drama which is obviously designed "to unfold the sage and serious doctrine of virginity." It is not the Puritan Milton portraying a drunken sensualist or a monster of vice in Comus; but it is the dramatist influenced by the breath of the Renaissance and consequently largely human in his motives and sympathies, drawing the lovely picture of a powerful being, keenly sensitive to impressions of beauty and of love, but misdirecting his powers to

base ends. The story here is much the same as it is with Satan in *Paradise Lost*. It is in the companion figures of Comus and the Lady that we find all the characteristics of Milton's temper and poetry fully displayed—the strange union of the strength of the Reformation with the beauty of the Renaissance.

"Of Bacchus and Circe born", Comus comes to a heritage of witcheries. He is a hedonist and he roves the Celtic and Iberian fields, 'ripe and frolic of his full grown age.' His principles are so attractive that they sedulously entice mortals away from a realization of their human nature 'the express resemblance of the gods' and transform them to brutish forms with like tastes and like passions. We see the implied meaning of the description of the influence of Comus and of "his baneful cup",

"With many murmurs mixed, whose pleasing poison  
The visage quite transforms of him that drinks,  
And the inglorious likeness of a beast  
Fixes instead, unmoulding reason's mintage  
Charactered in the face."

Comus, we may say, represents the baser enjoyments of the world which have a forcible appeal to all weak minds. But the spell of Comus cannot work on strong and well-balanced natures as that of the Lady in the story.

It is noteworthy that nowhere in the play, does Milton attribute to Comus anything criminal or positively ugly. If any such there be, it is not definitely represented, only implied in mere description. The situations in which he figures in the story, the speeches assigned to him, all reveal a nature keenly sensitive to rich forms and sweet sounds. "He surrounds himself with a world of art which lulls the soul into forgetfulness of its higher instincts and of duty; his palace is stately, and set out with all manner of deliciousness."

Comus is a powerful enchanter; but it would be wrong to emphasize the mechanical and outward symbols of such a power attributed to Comus in the story. It is an enchantment of the soul that he works, of the mind weaker than his own and hence susceptible to the temptations of the world. Only persons trained in the severe school of moral perfection can withstand his seductive charms. The Lady seems to have

understood the secret of the irresistible appeal of her captor when she says :

“ this juggler  
Would think to charm my judgment, as mine eyes  
Obtruding false rules pranked in reason's garb.”

The lyrical speeches of Comus are so many songs in praise of the world and its external charm. But he combines with a high imagination a powerful intellect bringing to the aid of his cause very logical and irrefragable arguments. He sees how Nature has intended beauty “for gentle usage and soft delicacy.” Desire for enjoyment is only the inevitable outcome of the frailty of human nature which demands “Refreshment after toil, ease after pain.” There is nothing profane about such a life, rather

If all the world  
Should, in a pet of temperance, feed on pulse,  
Drink the clear stream, and nothing wear but frieze  
The All-giver would be unthanked, would be unprised.

Hence his advice to the young Lady to gather rose buds while it is yet spring. One certainly feels that there is nothing savouring of “swinish gluttony” or even of monstrous vice in such reasoning. Dr. Johnson's remark makes the point clear. “The song of Comus has airiness and jollity ; but, what may recommend Milton's morals as well as his poetry, the invitations to pleasure are so general, that they excite no distinct images of corrupt enjoyment and take no dangerous hold on the fancy.” All along Comus conducts himself in a highly dignified manner. He would rather argue and convince the Lady by his arguments, though she was in his power, than have her unconvinced.

Thus viewed, Comus is the only human figure in a drama which abounds in pale abstractions and tedious moralizings. On him has the poet lavished all his inherent dramatic genius. He has a distinct personality of his own. Milton himself leaves the characters without names, for both the brothers and the Lady are never weary of repeating their slogan, so solemnly insensible they are to the humorous. There is more of the human element about this ostensibly wicked enchanter, with his susceptibility to impressions of beauty which he shares with other ordinary mortals, with

his weakness and his intelligence. The delineation seems to have moved even the imagination of the Puritan Milton, for he gives him the most melodious verse in the whole masque, verse rendered charming by the brightest hues of fancy. (Cf. the lines 668-671).

## XII. SUMMARIES OF IMPORTANT SCENES

(*Sc. IV*) *Enter the Two Brothers*—l. 331 onwards.

Dr. Johnson selects this scene for special condemnation. He finds fault with the scene for its undramatic nature and tedious moralizing. He says: "At last the Brothers enter with too much tranquillity; and when they have feared lest their sister should be in danger, the elder makes a speech in praise of chastity and the younger finds how fine it is to be a philosopher." There can be little doubt that the speeches in this scene are too long and hence lack the liveliness of dramatic dialogue, that they are delivered point blank at the audience. They are dreary and adapted neither to a drama nor to the gay and festive spirit of the masque. Coming as it does immediately after a most interesting scene where Comus leads the Lady away by guile, we feel that the dramatic interest in this scene is completely frozen.

The two Brothers return fetching water for their sister whom they had left behind alone in the dark wood. But to their fear and surprise she is not there. It is the occasion to search all through the forest and rescue her from the dangers of the place and of the particular time. But surprisingly enough these two make it an occasion for unnecessary philosophizings on most commonplace ideas, as for example, the power of Chastity and the grace of God. The younger brother is more rational and he cannot follow his brother's high-flown ideas as he says,

"Or, while we speak, within the direful grasp  
Of savage hunger or of savage heat."

his sister may be. The Elder one will rely on the potency of the radiant light of virtue which can manage any crisis, even the most perilous, 'though sun and moon were in the flat sea sunk.' This is against all reason, and really the younger brother cannot understand how anyone could hope



'Danger will wink on Opportunity.' The Elder Brother's hope is in the chastity of his sister, and forthwith he proceeds to descant on the power of Virgin Purity, by quoting abundant illustrations from classical mythology in support of his doctrine and by a philosophical interpretation of the contrasted natures of lust and saintly chastity. All too suddenly the Younger Brother, at whom this long speech covering 57 lines has been directed, finds the charm of Divine Philosophy to be 'as musical as is Apollo's lute,' probably, we think, urged by his eagerness to put an end to the whole discussion, which a person of his type could not follow.

The distant sounds of a hallo interrupts their conversation and turns their attention to the new-comer.

We cannot help imagining of the two brothers in this scene as only representing two normal phases of one and the same human mind—the one inclined to be rational and sceptical regarding the future, the other relying on faith in virtue and faith in God to help frail human nature in its struggle with temptation. The speeches of the Elder Brother are too philosophic to be lively. There is more of interest in the speeches of the younger gentleman, who exhibits comparatively better acquaintance with men and affairs; the same reason probably accounts for the greater poetic merit in such passages as

"But Beauty, like the fair Hesperian tree  
Laden with blooming gold, had need the guard  
Of dragon-watch with unenchanted eye  
To save her blossoms and descend her fruit."

Milton speaks every word in the speeches of the Elder Brother. For they express the poet's own ideals of beauty and of virtue, and exhibit a zeal to make out the identity of moral beauty with moral severity. Occasionally the poet becomes too metaphysical, as for example, when he strives to indicate how sensual self-indulgence transforms soul into body. It is a favourite idea with Plato who gives expression to it in a wellknown passage in the 'Phaedo'.

### XIII. THE TEMPTATION SCENE

This scene is dramatically the most effective part of *Comus* and marks the climax of the story to which all the pre-

vious situations have led by stages. The theme of the poem is virtue—chastity—its praise, and ultimate victory over temptations besetting it. A great part of the preceding scenes is taken up with moral discourses on the hidden strength of saintly virginity, and on the bestial nature of intemperance. It would appear, therefore, that Milton brings *Comus* face to face with the Lady, intending them as embodiments of two sharply opposing ideals. On the effect of this scene would depend the effect of the whole story in *Comus* according to Milton's Puritanic ideals. Hence he lavishes all his poetic skill and his dramatic talents in making the situation sufficiently appealing and powerful.

Dr. Johnson remarks : "The dispute between the Lady and Comus is the most animated and affecting scene of the drama, and wants nothing but a brisker reciprocation of objections and replies to invite attention and detain it." The success of the scene is largely due to the interest Milton himself felt in the two leading characters in it, with both of whom he sympathized. Every word in the scene is spoken by Milton himself. The scene (as is the case with the masque as a whole) is the last word of the earlier Milton, of Milton before he would strike.

From the dark woods the scene here "changes to a stately palace, set out with all manner of deliciousness, soft music, tables spread with all dainties." This is the stage direction regarding the setting for the scene. The Lady is at last in the power of the enchanter, who now prepares himself for the task of seducing the guileless mind of his victim by his honeyed words. The words of the tempter are of a piece with the luxury and charm of his life.

The arguments of Comus in favour of a life such as he is leading are irrefragable. He would try to make the Lady understand that Nature has lent her those dainty limbs for "gentle usage and soft delicacy." It is a law of nature which prescribes for frail mortals "refreshment after toil, ease after pain." Only stoics and cynics of the Diogenes type will denounce all pleasures and praise "the lean and sallow Abstinence." Again, does it not argue an insensibility to

the grace of the Almighty—this indifference to the beauty of the world and the loveliness of life in it ?

“ If all the world  
Should in a pet of temperance feed on pulse,  
Drink the clear stream, and nothing wear but frieze,  
The all-giver would be unthanked.”

So his advice to the Lady would be to gather rosebuds even while the spring season is in its prime and not to let time slip away, till the neglected rose should wither “ on the stalk with languished head.”

Even the Lady acknowledges the subtle influence of the juggler’s talk, of the reason’s garb, which his arguments have assumed. Quite naturally therefore she does not attempt any serious refutation of his reasonings but rests content with an elaborate and tedious propounding of her view of life. She speaks of “ the sunclad power of chastity ” and of

‘ The sublime notion and high mystery  
That must be uttered to unfold the sage  
And serious doctrine of virginity.’

and in a fit of indignation she foretells his imminent and utter destruction.

Comus is partly frightened by her words, partly annoyed, and he is preparing ‘ to try her yet more strongly ’ when the two brothers rush in and spoil his schemes.

Even here the sympathy of the reader is with the enchanter who speaks in a more appealing vein than the Lady herself, and Milton has invested Comus with an extraordinary intelligence and a keen aesthetic sensibility, and he has in consequence made him the most attractive figure in the whole story. It may be that Milton designed Comus as a monster, craving for intemperate self-indulgence, but he is in reality more human than his saintly opponents. The difference can be noted even in the tone of the poetry ascribed to Comus in the play. Note his opening speech on the pleasures he promises to the Lady :

“ See here be all the pleasures  
That fancy can beget on youthful thoughts,  
When the fresh blood grows lively, and returns  
Brisk as the April buds in primrose season.”

It is also noteworthy that, even when the Lady is in his power, Comus, conscious of his potent charms, would rather convince her of the falsity of her position than employ any brute force on her.

Over against this powerful enchanter stands the pure figure of the Lady. Something of the weakness of her sex belongs to her, but her words betray no fear, no hesitation. "When the hour of trial comes she shows herself strong in powers of judgment and of reasoning, strong in her spiritual nature, in her tenacity of moral truth, in her indignation against sin." The words of Comus have no effect on her, for she is clear-sighted and firm regarding her saintly outlook on life.

Dowden remarks that "there is much in the Lady which resembles the youthful Milton himself, and we may well believe that the great debate concerning temperance was not altogether dramatic, but was in part a record of passages in the poet's own spiritual history." It is true Milton in his life is faced with the same temptations, which the Lady has to face. He resists them as she does in the play. Her words are the best approximations to the ideal which Milton projected before him of himself.

Great ingenuity has been spent by critics in noting Milton's indebtedness in this scene to earlier writers. A similarity is found by them between the palace of Comus and the Bower of Bliss in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (Book II Canto XII). Of course, there is the same beauty and the same luxury offered to the physical senses in both the scenes. But there the resemblance ends. On this basis Milton builds his lofty and sublime ideals of life as a Puritan and vindicates the truth of his view.

#### XIV. A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF COMUS

The plan of *Comus* is extremely simple. We can conveniently divide the masque into three parts which may be briefly characterised thus :

- I. The tempter and the tempted : ll. 1-658. This scene is laid in a wild wood.

- II. The temptation and the rescue : ll. 659-958.  
Scene. The Palace of Comus.
- III. The Triumph : ll. 959-end. This takes place  
in the President's Castle.

The masque opens with a prologue which explains the occasion of the piece and compliments the aristocratic patrons who form the audience. The dramatic interest begins when we are first introduced to Comus and his monstrous rout, then to the Lady alone and lost in the woods, and finally to Comus and the Lady in company. The conversation of the two brothers foreshadows the nature and probable outcome of the Lady's trial. "This is one of the more Miltonic parts of the masque ; in the philosophical reasoning of the Elder Brother, as opposed to the matter-of-fact arguments of the younger, we trace the young poet fresh from the study of the divine volume of Plato, and filled with a noble trust in God."

The second scene takes us to the abode of the wicked enchanter, who endeavours "under fair pretence of friendly ends" to win the love of the Lady. But his sophistical arguments are of no avail against the chaste virgin. At this point the two brothers come on the scene, aided and instructed by the Attendant Spirit, who is disguised as Thyrsis, a shepherd in the service of the Earl of Bridgewater. The Brothers carelessly let the enchanter escape with his magic wand, and the Lady is consequently left spell-bound in the haunt of impurity. On the advice of the Attendant Spirit they appeal for help in their distress to the pure nymph Sabrina, who is "swift to aid a virgin, such as was herself, in hard-besetting need."

The central purport of the masque is revealed in the contention between Comus and the Lady. "It is a song to temperance as the ground of freedom, to temperance as the guard of all the virtues, to beauty as secured by temperance, and its central point and climax is in the pleading of these motives by the Lady against their opposites in the mouth of the Lord of sensual Revel."

The Attendant Spirit then leads the Lady and her

brothers to their noble parents. <sup>1</sup> The spirit speaks the epilogue, calling upon mortals to strive after Virtue :

“ Love Virtue ; she alone is free  
 She can teach ye how to climb  
 Higher than the sphery chime ;  
 Or, if Virtue feeble were,  
 Heaven itself would stoop to her.”

## XV. ANNOTATIONS

*The references are to the Verity Edition of Comus.*

1. ll. 73-77. In the wild wood, which is the scene of action in the drama, the Attendant Spirit first appears and in a long speech, obviously designed to give the necessary information to the audience, for them to understand the story, proclaims his functions in the forest as the guide of the favourites of Jove benighted there. The wood is dreary and full of dangers to “ the forlorn and wandering passenger.” It is haunted by a wicked and powerful enchanter named Comus, the son of Bacchus and Circe, and hence the inheritor of twofold vice. He offers to every weary traveller his “ orient liquor in a crystal glass,” the taste of which speedily transforms the human countenance of the unhappy victim into some brutish form. The change affects the mind as well, for the person thus altered has no notion of his disfigurement, even delights in it and forgets all past in a life of base self-indulgence.

The whole story is an adaptation of Homer’s story of Circe in the *Odyssey*. But Milton varies from Homer, and even improves on his original. For, “ In Homer, they are sorry for the exchange, but here the allegory is finely improved, and they have no notion of their disfigurement.” This improvement upon Homer might still be copied from Homer who ascribes much the same effect to the herb Lotus, ‘ the eater of which,’ as Homer says, ‘ had no more wish to bring tidings nor to come back, but there he chose to abide.....forgetful of his homeward way.’

*Sensual sty*—Cf. Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, II. xii. l. 86, where the hog Grill refuses to get back his reason of which Acrasia has robbed him by her charms.

Can we not see here an allegorical representation of the nature in which man succumbs to vice in the world? The passage describes the effect of sin upon the human mind. Milton conceives of sin not as a violent obsession on the soul of man, but as a delusion, a gradual seduction of the senses.

2. ll. 111-114.—Comus, the hero of the story, first appears on the scene, leading his 'rout' or horde and singing a graceful song, inviting all mortals to a life of ease and pleasure. His proper season is the night when 'Rigour is gone to bed and Advice and sour Severity' 'with their grave saws, in slumber lie.' Quite gaily, he compares himself and his followers to the harmoniously-moving stars in the heavens, who, as the eyes of heaven, keep watch at night and in their mystic dance round the earth mark the passage of time upon it.

*of purer fire*—Probably Milton refers to the old theory regarding the four constituent elements—Earth, Water, Air, and Fire. The two last were commonly regarded as the lighter elements, while the other two were supposed to clog the spirit of man and keep it bound down to the world; hence 'purer.'

*the starry quire*.—Referring to the motion of the heavenly planets, which produced a music, popularly termed the music of the spheres, Shakespeare refers to it in his *Merchant of Venice* :—

There is not the smallest orb which thou beholdest but in his  
motion sings  
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubin.

*nightly watchful spheres*—The stars are regarded fancifully by Milton as the eyes of heaven, keeping watch in the night.

*Lead.....years*—Even as the stars move round the earth, they mark the lapse of time in the world. Cf. *Paradise Lost*, III 579.

They as they move,  
Their starry dance in numbers that compute  
Days, months, and years.

The idea in the passage is quite in keeping with the gay temper of Comus as is also the tripping measure of the

song which resembles nothing so much as Milton's own *L'Allegro*.

3. ll. 128-133—(Take the first two sentences from the previous annotation and continue). Hence he would celebrate the night-time in mirth and sport. He invokes the aid of 'the goddess of nocturnal sport,' in his desire to do honour to her by paying to her all her utmost dues.

*Cottyto*—A Thracian goddess, festivals held in whose honour were characterized by licentious rites which were however kept secret.

*dragon womb of Stygian darkness*—Complete darkness as of the nether world.

*Spets*—spits.

Even this invitation to Cottyto is so light in tone that we cannot regard it as either odious or dangerous.

4. ll. 195-200. *else.....traveller?* The lady is almost frightened out of her wits when she finds herself alone in the dark wood. She has been waiting for a long time expecting her brothers to return with water for her. Their absence fills her with misgivings: 'why they came not back, is now the labour of my thoughts.' She thinks, that they are probably wandering in the forest having lost their way in the darkness, and she fancifully blames the night for having thus closed up the stars of heaven in darkness and made it impossible for them to perform their true function in Nature. Nature has intended the stars 'to give due light to the misled and lonely traveller.'

Stopford Brooke remarks on this passage: 'Nothing can be worse in conception than the comparison of night to a thief, who shuts up, for the sake of his felony, the stars, whose lamps burn everlasting oil, in his dark lantern. The better it is carried out and the finer the verse the worse it is.' Certainly the imagery in the passage is so far-fetched and extravagant, that it becomes very ugly in poetry. This is one of the few instances in the poem of an error of taste, the like of which can be found in abundance in Milton's earlier poetry. (Cf. the Nativity Ode). There is nothing bad in itself in the comparison of the stars to lamps of



Heaven. (*e.g.*, Shelley speaks of 'the lamps of Heaven' flashing 'a softer light.'). But the difficulty arises when Milton works the idea to its minutest details.

Quite properly, therefore, the whole passage and some lines after that (ll. 195-225) are omitted in the Bridgewater Mss. 'perhaps to lighten the part of the young lady; perhaps from motives of delicacy,' for it is certainly undignified particularly in a lady to speak like this.

Todd finds in this passage a reference to the Gunpowder Plot, on what basis, we shall not labour to discover.

*And filled their lamps*—An error in construction which can be removed by substituting 'filling their lamps,' or and 'whose lamps she filled.' But this change would make the passage clumsier, though more grammatical.

5. ll. 240-243. The Lady is so perplexed at not seeing her brothers return, even after a long time, that she appeals to the Echo in a very charming song to aid her in discovering their whereabouts. In masques the Echo was a common personage to appeal to and questions addressed to him were duly replied to from behind the scenes. In most exquisite language the Lady praises Echo and requests the power to tell her whether her brothers, fair as Narcissus, have been hid by her in some flowery cave. For this service the Lady would pray that her invisible helper might be promoted to the heavens and "make the sphere-music there resound or re-echo."

Echo is Queen of Parley, for she maintains a regular dialogue, and is daughter of the sphere because her music is of a piece and harmonizes with the music of the spheres. "She is one form of the voice, which is named in the Solemn Music,

- "Sphere-born harmonious sisters voice and verse."

To the technical skill of Milton is due 'the divine ravishing enchantment' of the lyric. The play of the vowel-sounds in the last three lines, we have just now explained, and the finishing touch which the final Alexandrine gives to the whole song are some among the many devices employed by the poet herein. (*e.g.*, Sweet Queen of Parley; all long

vowels—or the way in which the alliteration is managed in the last line.)

6. ll. 257-264. *Scylla.....till now*.—It is not surprising that the song of the Lady makes a profound impression on Comus. Of all the characters in the play he alone is the best fitted to appreciate such artistic beauty, and his keen sensibilities are roused by these raptures moving the vocal air of the singer. He has heard of the song the sirens sang and of the power it had on all listeners. He has also heard of the influence which a Sicilian shepherd's music had on Scylla and Charybdis, two unfeeling monsters of the ocean. But the music in both these cases produced their effect by inducing a sort of forgetfulness in the listeners, by 'lulling the sense in pleasing slumber.' But the song he has listened to now seems to have something holy about it; it affords him real heartfelt delight, such pleasure as strikes home. "This is an elevated pleasure which one enjoys with all the faculties keenly awake to it and not soothed into unconsciousness."

The reference in this passage is not to Homer's story of Scylla and Charybdis, in the *Odyssey*. These were according to Homer two monsters of the ocean, dwelling in two rocks between Italy and Sicily. The rocks were only a short distance from one another. Scylla, a fearful figure always barked terribly like a dog; Charybdis would thrice every day "swallow down the waters of the sea and thrice throw them up again." Milton adds to this story another from a Latin poet, Silius Italicus, who describes a situation where these two monsters were tamed by a Sicilian shepherd's music.

It is interesting to note the impetus and passion of the Speech of Comus. The song and the praise of it match each other remarkably well.

7. ll. 341-342. The two brothers return and do not find their sister where they had left her. The moon has passed behind the clouds and the whole place is immersed 'in double night of darkness and of shades.' The elder brother would be satisfied even with the light of some gentle taper to indicate his way to him. The speaker prays for a shaft of light from a cottage to give him like pilotage.

This is a somewhat fanciful way of saying that the light of the taper will be to them, what the constellations are to the mariners.

*Star of Arcady.* Reference to the Great Bear. The story says how the Arcadian nymph Calisto was turned to a star (The Great Bear), while her son became the Lesser Bear or Cynosure, by which the Tyrian sailors guided their way in the sea. The word Cynosure secondarily comes to mean 'a guiding star' in general, 'the star that fascinates all eyes'—Cf. *L'Allegro* 'The cynosure of neighbouring eyes.'

The whole speech of the elder brother is extremely undramatic and this passage in it, in particular. It does not betray any fear or anxiety. It is a leisured and fanciful description, in which even poetic merit is sadly lacking.

8. ll. 375-380. *And wisdom's.....impaired.* To the anxious questionings of the younger Brother, regarding their sister's danger, the Elder attempts a consoling reply by a philosophic discourse on the strength of virtue. The latter would rely on the essential goodness of his sister's nature which, he is sure, will help her against all dangers real and imaginary. He then indulges in an unpoetic description of Wisdom retiring to solitude, and aided by her nurse Contemplation adjusting her wings after a period of confusion and dismay, which has ruffled and impaired their strength.

*plumes*, in the sense of 'prunes' or 'adjusts.'

*seeks to*—repairs to.

*all-to—ruffled*—All editions treat 'to' as a separate word. But we can take it as an intensifying prefix. The only interest attaching to the passage is the reference it has to Milton's own life. Mark Pattison sees in the passage 'a fragment of the poet's own autobiography' describing the years of quiet he spent at Horton. Like Wisdom's Self, and to win her, Milton repairs to the solitude of his father's country-seat.

9. ll. 393-397. The Second Brother is more rational and cannot understand his brother's arguments about the abstract power of Virtue, Wisdom and Contemplation.

Not that he is sceptical ; he is as much inclined to believe in things which offer some basis of credibility. But he is unable to see how his more philosophic brother applies his theories to their sister's condition. It is only ascetics 'affecting the pensive secrecy of desert cell,' who need have no fear of danger even in solitude. But a beautiful girl, like their sister, certainly needs continual guardian watch to save her from vicious people craving for intemperate self-indulgence.

*The fair Hesperian tree*—Beauty is here compared by the poet to the golden-fruited tree in the garden of Hesperides, which was guarded by a dragon with sleepless watch. Beauty, Milton says, should be guarded in like manner, for "Beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold."

*unenchantèd*—not to be enchanted. Cf. 'uncontrolled' in l. 793.

It is one of the most poetic passages in *Comus*, where the classical and romantic elements of Milton's poetry are found in perfect fusion. The picture of the Hesperian gardens seems to have had a peculiar fascination for the poet, for his poems contain many references to the same image. Note the lyrical epilogue to the Masque :

"Hesperus and his daughters three,  
That sing about the golden tree."

or in *Paradise Lost*, when Satan first enters the garden of Eden, it seems

"Like those Hesperian gardens fam'd of old,  
Fortunate fields and groves and flowery vales."

The reference to 'the Ladies of the Hesperides' occurs again in the famous passage in *Paradise Regained*, when Milton for the last time looks on the realms of romance.

10. ll. 447-452. The Elder Brother wants to put an end to his brother's anxiety and hence explains to him how the chastity of their sister is to her a source of great strength. 'She that has that (chastity) is clad in complete steel.' He could bring forward many instances to prove the truth of his contention, from the old stories of Greece. The power of Diana was the result of her virginity. The shield of Pallas Athene had on it fixed the head of Medusa, the

mere sight of which froze Minerva's foes to congealed stone ; this, the speaker says, is only symbolic of the awe-inspiring force of rigid looks of stern chastity which overcomes even brute violence with simple means.

*Snaky-headed Gorgon shield*—referring to the shield of Athene on which was fixed the Gorgonian of Medusa whom Perseus had slain. Cf. *Illiad* "therein (*i.e.*, on Athene's aegis) is the dreadful Monster's Gorgon head dreadful and grim." Medusa's hair has been changed to serpents by Minerva ; hence 'snaky-headed.'

The figure on the shield was so terrible, that all who looked on it were turned to stone.

We can note how Milton, following Plato, invests the outworn legends of ancient days with a new moral significance. He reads a fresh meaning into the stories of Diana and Minerva.

11. ll. 453-475. The Elder Brother passes on from mythological allusion to Christianity tinged slightly by the philosophy of Plato.

"Here we have the germ of the peculiar speculation afterwards developed more at length in Raphael's speech to Adam in *Paradise Lost*, V. 404-503," that it is a hierarchy from inanimate matter up to deity ; man is in between these two and can, by his virtue ascend to the level of the immortal angels, and turn all to spirit, or will, by his base passions and desires clot his soul until 'she quite lose the divine property of her first being.'

This idea is a favourite one with Plato and the essence of it may be found in Plato's *Phaedo*. "Such a soul (the sensual) is depressed and dragged down again to the visible world because she is afraid of the invisible and of the world below prowling about tombs and sepulchres, in the neighbourhood of which, as they tell, are seen certain ghostly apparitions and souls, which have not departed pure."

It is one of the popular ideas of folklore, this desire of the soul to cling to the resting-place of the body.

12. ll. 636-637. The Attendant Spirit disguised as Thyrasis informs the Brothers of the position in which their

sister is. She is in the palace of Comus and hence is in danger of being victimized by him. The only hope lies in immediate action. Then the spirit says how they need have no fear of the enchantments of Comus, for he has with him a wonderful herb, Haemony, which is more medicinal than 'that Moly that Hercules once to wise Ulysses gave.'

The allusion here is to the white flower, 'like unto milk' with its root black, which was given to Ulysses as a protection against Circe and her charms.

13. ll. 675-678. Comus has the Lady in his palace and he has bound her down to a chair by his potent charms. He offers her his orient liquor, in the crystal glass, the taste of which would make her utterly his slave. He describes the glorious properties of the drink, and says how it is far more pleasant to the senses than the plain-lulling drug which the wife of Thone Polydamna gave to Jove-born Helena.

The allusion here is to the drug given to Helen of the Trojan War and by her administered to Menelaus at Sparta. A man forgot all his griefs for the rest of the day on which he drank it, "not though men slew his brother or dear son before his face." Spenser alludes to it in his *Faerie Queene* in Book IV as a drink 'to assuage Hart's grief, and bitter gall away to chace.'

14. ll. 706-707. Comus cannot appreciate the doctrine of the cynics in praise of a life of stern asceticism and abstinence. He tells the Lady that it is foolish to lend one's ears to such stiff-necked people as cannot see the joy of life. They guide their lives by the precepts of cynics, like Diogenes of the tub and condemn all human pleasures, especially those of the sense.

*those bridge doctors of the stoic fur Budge*—N. E. D. explains it as solemn, stiff, formal. Milton uses the word 'fur' here as related to 'formal,' though it is not etymologically right.

*cynic tub*—Allusion to Diogenes, the philosopher of the tub, who led a life of extreme austerity and moroseness at Athens.

This passage states one side of the conflict which forms the theme of the story. It can be seen that there is nothing in itself dangerous or immoral about the invitations to pleasure which Comus offers, and which as Dr. Johnson remarks 'take no dangerous hold on the fancy.'

15. ll. 783-787. The Lady cannot properly retort to the arguments of her foe and she rests content with merely condemning his words and attitude to her as wicked. She relies on the 'sun-clad power' of her chastity, which he of course cannot understand. It lies beyond the province of his knowledge. He has neither the inclination nor the ability to know the lofty idea that must be explained well to make clear 'the serious doctrine of virginity.'

This, as Prof. Masson points out, is the real Miltonic idea which informs *Comus* and penetrates the delineation of all the leading characters in it.

Editors note many resemblances in Milton's prose writings to this passage and infer therefrom, that the lines express an ideal which Milton set before himself in his life. He refers to Chastity and Love as 'abstracted sublimities' in his 'Apology for Somecymnuns.' In the same treatise he speaks of 'those chaste and high mysteries' which can be unfolded only with the aid of the doctrine of the holy scripture. But 'the gross unpurged ear' of Comus cannot catch the music of such lofty language.

*Mystery*—used here in the sense of a truth, which comes as a revelation to men.

**COMUS**



THE PERSONS

THE ATTENDANT SPIRIT, *afterwards in the habit of* THYRSIS.  
COMUS, *with his crew.*

THE LADY.

FIRST BROTHER.

SECOND BROTHER.

SABRINA, *the Nymph.*

*The chief persons who presented were—*

THE LORD BRACKLEY.

MR. THOMAS EGERTON, *his brother.*

THE LADY ALICE EGERTON.

# COMUS

## A MASK

Presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634, before the Earl of  
Bridgewater, then President of Wales.

*The first scene discovers a wild wood.*

THE ATTENDANT SPIRIT *descends or enters.*

BEFORE the starry threshold of Jove's court  
My mansion is, where those immortal shapes  
Of bright aerial spirits live insphered  
In regions mild of calm and serene air,  
Above the smoke stir of this dim spot  
Which men call Earth, and with low-thoughted care  
Confined and pestered in this pinfold here,  
Strive to keep up a frail and feverish being,  
Unmindful of the crown that Virtue gives,  
After this mortal change, to her true servants 10  
Amongst the enthroned gods on sainted seats.  
Yet some there be that by due steps aspire  
To lay their just hands on that golden key,  
That opes the palace of eternity.  
To such my errand is ; and, but for such,  
I would not soil these pure ambrosial weeds  
With the rank vapours of this sin-worn mould.

But to my task. Neptune, besides the sway  
Of every salt flood and each ebbing stream,  
Took in by lot 'twixt high and nether Jove, 20  
Imperial rule of all the sea-girt isles  
That, like to rich and various gems, inlay  
The unadorned bosom of the deep ; )  
Which he, to grace his tributary gods,

Of this occasion. But I hear the tread  
Of hateful steps ; I must be viewless now.

[COMUS enters with a charming-rod in one hand, his glass in the other ; with him a rout of monsters, headed like sundry sorts of wild beasts, but otherwise like men and women, their apparel glistening : they come in making a riotous and unruly noise, with torches in their hands.]

COMUS. The star that bids the shepherd fold  
Now the top of heaven doth hold ;  
And the gilded car of day  
His glowing axle doth ally  
In the steep Atlantic stream ;  
And the slope sun his upward beam  
Shoots against the dusky pole,  
Pacing toward the other goal 100  
Of his chamber in the east.  
Meanwhile, welcome joy and feast,  
Midnight shout and revelry,  
Tipsy dance and jollity  
Braid your locks with rosy twine,  
Dropping odours, dropping wine.  
Rigour now is gone to bed ;  
And Advice with scrupulous head,  
Strict Age, and sour Severity  
With their grave saws, in slumber lie. 110

(We that are of purer fire  
Imitate the starry quire,  
Who, in their nightly watchful spheres,  
Lead in swift round the months and years.)  
The sounds and seas, with all their finny drove,  
Now to the moon in wavering morrice move ;  
And on the tawny sands and shelves  
Trip the pert faeries and the dapper elves.

By dimpled brook and fountain brim,  
The wood-nymphs, decked with daisies trim, 120  
Their merry wakes and pastimes keep :  
What hath night to do with sleep ?  
Night hath better sweets to prove ;  
Venus now wakes, and wakens Love.  
Come, let us our rites begin ;  
'Tis only daylight that makes sin,  
Which these dun shades will ne'er report.  
Hail, goddess of nocturnal sport,  
Dark-veiled Cotytto, to whom the secret flame  
Of midnight torches burns ; mysterious dame, 130  
That ne'er art called but when the dragon womb  
Of Stygian darkness spets her thickest gloom,  
And makes one blot of all the air  
Stay thy cloudy ebon chair,  
Wherein thou ridest with Hecate, and befriend  
Us thy vowed priests, till utmost end  
Of all thy dues be done, and none left out ;  
Ere the blabbing eastern scout,  
The nice morn, on the Indian steep  
From her cabined loophole peep, 140  
And to the tell-tale sun descry  
Our concealed solemnity.  
Come, knit hands, and beat the ground  
In a light fantastic round.

*The Measure*

Break off, break off ! I feel the different pace  
Of some chaste footing near about this ground.  
Run to your shrouds within these brakes and trees ;  
Our number may affright. Some virgin sure  
(For so I can distinguish by mine art)  
Benighted in these woods ! Now to my charms, 150

By course commits to several government,  
 And gives them leave to wear their sapphire crowns  
 And wield their little tridents. (But this Isle,  
 The greatest and the best of all the main,  
He quarters to his blue-haired deities )  
And all this tract that fronts the falling sun  
 A noble Peer of mickle trust and power  
 Has in his charge, with tempered awe to guide  
 An old and haughty nation, proud in arms :  
 Where his fair offspring, nursed in princely lore,  
 Are coming to attend their father's state,  
 And new-intrusted sceptre ; but their way  
 Lies through the perplexed paths of this drear wood,  
 The nodding horror of whose shady brows  
 Threats the forlorn and wandering passenger ;  
 And here their tender age might suffer peril,  
 But that by quick command from sovran Jove  
 I was despatched for their defence and guard !  
 And listen why ; for I will tell you now  
 What never yet was heard in tale or song,  
 From old or modern bard, in hall or bower.

( Bacchus, that first from out the purple grape  
 Crushed the sweet poison of misused wine,  
 After the Tuscan mariners transformed,  
 Coasting the Tyrrhene shore, as the winds listed,  
 On Circe's island fell. (Who knows not Circe,  
 The daughter of the Sun, whose charmed cup  
 Whoever tasted lost his upright shape,  
 And downward fell into a grovelling swine ?) )  
 This Nymph, that gazed upon his clustering locks,  
 With ivy berries wreathed, and his blithe youth,  
 Had by him, ere he parted thence, a son  
 Much like his father, but his mother more,

Whom therefore she brought up, and Comus named :  
 Who, ripe and frolic of his full grown age,  
 Roving the Celtic and Iberian fields, 60  
 At last betakes him to this ominous wood,  
 And, in thick shelter of black shades imbowered,  
 Excels his mother at her mighty art ;  
 Offering to every weary traveller  
 His orient liquor in a crystal glass,  
 To quench the drouth of Phoebus ; which as they taste  
 (For most do taste through fond intemperate thirst),  
 Soon as the potion works, their human countenance, *drink.*  
 The express resemblance of the gods, is changed  
 Into some brutish form of wolf, or bear, 70  
 Or ounce, or tiger, hog, or bearded goat,  
 All other parts remaining as they were.  
And they, so perfect is their misery,  
Not once perceive their foul disfigurement;  
But boast themselves more comely than before,  
And all their friends and native home forget,  
To roll with pleasure in a sensual sty.  
 Therefore, when any favoured of high Jove  
 Chances to pass through this adventurous glade,  
 Swift as the sparkle of a glancing star 80  
 I shoot from heaven, to give him safe convoy,  
 As now I do. But first I must put off  
 These my sky robes spun out of Iris' woof,  
 And take the weeds and likeness of a swain  
 That to the service of this house belongs,  
 Who with his soft pipe, and smooth, dittied song,  
 Well knows to still the wild winds when they roar,  
 And hush the waving woods ; nor of less faith,  
 And in this office of his mountain watch  
 Likeliest, and nearest to the present aid 90

And to my wily trains : I shall ere long  
 Be well stocked with as fair as grazed  
 About my mother Circe. Thus I hurl  
 My dazzling spells into the spongy air,  
 Of power to cheat the eye with blear illusion,  
 And give it false presentments, lest the place  
 And my quaint habits breed astonishment,  
 And put the damsel to suspicious flight ;  
 Which must not be, for that's against my course :  
 I, under fair pretence of friendly ends, 160  
 And well-placed words of glozing courtesy,  
 Baited with reasons not unplaussible,  
 Wind me into the easy-hearted man,  
 And hug him into snares. When once her eye  
 Hath met the virtue of this magic dust,  
 I shall appear some harmless villager,  
 Whom thrift keeps up about his country gear.  
 But here she comes ; I fairly step aside,  
 And hearken, if I may, her business here.

*The LADY enters*

LADY. This way the noise was, if mine ear be true, 170  
 My best guide now : methought it was the sound  
 Of riot and ill-managed merriment,  
 Such as the jocund flute or gamesome pipe  
 Stirs up among the loose unlettered hinds,  
 When, for their teeming flocks and granges full,  
 In wanton dance they praise the bounteous Pan,  
 And thank the gods amiss. (I should be loth  
To meet the rudeness and swilled insolence  
Of such late wassailers ;) yet, O ! where else  
 Shall I inform my unacquainted feet 180  
 In the blind mazes of this tangled wood ?  
 My brothers, when they saw me wearied out

With this long way, resolving here to lodge  
 Under the spreading favour of these pines,  
 Stepped, as they said, to the next thicket-side  
 To bring me berries, or such cooling fruit  
 As the kind hospitable woods provide.  
 They left me then when the gray-hooded Even,  
Like a sad votarist in palmer's weed,  
Rose from the hindmost wheels of Phoebus' wain. 190  
 But where they are, and why they came not back,  
 Is now the labour of my thoughts ; 'tis likeliest  
 They had engaged their wandering steps too far,  
 And envious darkness, ere they could return,  
 Had stole them from me : (else O thievish Night,  
 Why shouldst thou, but for some felonious end,  
 In thy dark lantern thus close up the stars  
 That nature hung in heaven, and filled their lamps  
 With everlasting oil, to give due light  
 To the misled and lonely traveller ) 200  
 This is the place, as well as I may guess,  
 Whence even now the tumult of loud mirth  
 Was rife, and perfect in my listening ear ;  
 Yet nought but single darkness do I find.  
 What might this be ? A thousand fantasies  
 Begin to throng into my memory,  
 Of calling shapes, and beckoning shadows dire,  
 And airy tongues that syllable men's names  
 On sands, and shores, and desert wildernesses.  
 These thoughts may startle well, but not astound 210  
 The virtuous mind, that ever walks attended  
 By a strong siding champion, Conscience.  
 O, welcome, pure-eyed Faith, white-handed Hope,  
 Thou hovering angel girt with golden wings,  
 And thou, unblemished form of Chastity !



I see ye visibly and now believe  
 That He, the Supreme Good, to whom all things ill  
 Are but as slavish officers of vengeance,  
 Would send a glistening guardian, if need were,  
 To keep my life and honour unassailed.— 220  
 Was I deceived, or did a sable cloud  
 Turn forth her silver lining on the night ?  
 I did not err ; there does a sable cloud  
 Turn forth her silver lining on the night,  
 And casts a gleam over this tufted grove.  
 I cannot hallo to my brothers, but  
 Such noise as I can make to be heard farthest  
 I'll venture, for my new-enlivened spirits  
 Prompt me ; and they perhaps are not far off.

*Song*

Sweet Echo, sweetest nymph, that liv'st unseen 230  
     Within thy airy shell  
     By slow Meander's margent green,  
     And in the violet-embroidered vale  
     Where the love-lorn nightingale  
 Nightly to thee her sad song mourneth well ;  
 Canst thou not tell me of a gentle pair  
     That liketh thy Narcissus are ? )  
     O, if thou have  
     Hid them in some flowery cave,  
     Tell me but where, 240

Sweet Queen of parley, Daughter of the sphere  
 So mayst thou be translated to the skies,  
 And give resounding grace to all heaven's harmonies.//

COMUS. Can any mortal mixture of earth's mould  
 Breathe such divine enchanting ravishment ?  
 Sure something holy lodges in that breast,  
 And with these raptures moves the vocal air

To testify his hidden residence.  
 How sweetly did they float upon the wings  
 Of silence, through the empty-vaulted night, 250  
 At every fall smoothing the raven down  
 Of darkness till it smiled ! ( I have oft heard  
 My mother Circe with the Sirens three,  
 Amidst the flowery-kirtled Naiades,  
 Culling their potent herbs and baleful drugs ;  
 Who, as they sung, would take the prisoned soul,  
 And lap it in Elysium : Scylla wept,  
 And chid her barking waves into attention,  
 And fell Charybdis murmured soft applause. )  
 Yet they in pleasing slumber lulled the sense, 260  
 And in sweet madness robbed it of itself ;  
 But such a sacred and home-felt delight,  
 Such sober certainty of waking bliss, #  
 I never heard till now. I'll speak to her,  
 And she shall be my queen.—Hail, foreign wonder !  
 Whom certain these rough shades did never breed,  
 Unless the goddess that in rural shrine  
 Dwellest here with Pan or Sylvan, by blest song  
 Forbidding every bleak unkindly fog  
 To touch the prosperous growth of this tall wood. 270

LADY. Nay, gentle shepherd, ill is lost that praise,  
 That is addressed to unattending ears :  
 Not any boast of skill, but extreme shift  
 How to regain my severed company,  
 Compelled me to awake the courteous Echo  
 To give me answer from her mossy couch.

COMUS. What chance, good Lady, hath bereft you thus ?

LADY. Dim darkness, and this leavy labyrinth.

COMUS. Could that divide you from near-ushering guides ?

LADY. They left me weary on a grassy turf. - 280

COMUS. By false hood, or discourtesy, or why ?

LADY. To see i' the valley some cool friendly spring.

COMUS. And left your fair side all unguarded, Lady ?

LADY. They were but twain, and purposed quick return.

COMUS. Perhaps forestalling night prevented them.

LADY. How easy my misfortune is to hit !

COMUS. Imports their loss, beside the present need ?

LADY. No less than if I should my brothers lose.

COMUS. Were they of manly prime, or youthful bloom ?

LADY. As smooth as Hebe's their unrazored lips. 290

COMUS. Two such I saw, what time the laboured ox

In his loose traces from the furrow came,

And the swinked hedger at his supper sat.

I saw them under a green mantling vine,

That crawls along the side of yon small hill,

Plucking ripe clusters from the tender shoots ;

Their port was more than human, as they stood :

I took it for a faery vision

Of some gay creatures of the element,

That in the colours of the rainbow live, 300

And play i' the plighted clouds. I was awe-strook,

And, as I passed, I worshipped ; if those you seek,

It were a journey like the path to heaven,

To help you find them.

LADY. Gentle villager,

What readiest way would bring me to that place ?

COMUS. Due west it rises from this shrubby point.

LADY. To find out that, good shepherd, I suppose,

In such a scant allowance of star-light

Would overtask the best land-pilot's art,

Without the sure guess of well-practised feet. 310

COMUS. I know each lane, and every alley green,

Dingle, or bushy dell, of this wild wood,

And every bosky bourn from side to side,  
 My daily walks and ancient neighbourhood ;  
 And if your stray attendance be yet lodged,  
 Or shroud within these limits, I shall know  
 Ere morrow wake, or the low-roosted lark  
 From her thatched pallet rouse : if otherwise,  
 I can conduct you, Lady, to a low  
 But loyal cottage, where you may be safe 320  
 Till further quest.

LADY. Shepherd, I take thy word,  
 And trust thy honest-offered courtesy,  
 Which oft is sooner found in lowly sheds,  
 With smoky rafters, than in tapestry halls  
 In courts of princes, where it first was named,  
 And yet is most pretended. In a place  
 Less warranted than this, or less secure,  
 I cannot be, that I should fear to change it.  
 Eye me, blest Providence, and square my trial  
 To my proportioned strength ! Shepherd, lead on. 330

*Enter the TWO BROTHERS.*

ELD. BRO. Unmuffle, ye faint stars ; and thou, fair  
 Moon,  
 Thou won't st to love the traveller's benison,  
Stoop thy pale visage through an amber cloud,  
 And disinherit Chaos, that reigns here  
 In double night of darkness and of shades ; )  
 Or, if your influence be quite damned up  
 With black usurping mists, some gentle taper,  
 Though a rush-candle from the wicker hole  
 Of some clay habitation, visit us  
With thy long-levelled rule of streaming light, 340  
And thou shalt be our star of Arcady,

Or Tyrian Cynosure.)

SEC. BRO. Or, if our eyes  
 Be barred that happiness, might we but hear  
 The folded flocks, penned in their wattled cotes,  
 Or sound of pastoral reed with oaten stops,  
 Or whistle from the lodge, or village cock  
 Count the night watches to his feathery dames,  
 'Twould be some solace yet, some little cheering,  
 In this close dungeon of innumerable boughs.  
 But, oh, that hapless virgin, our lost sister ! 350  
 Where may she wander now, whither betake her  
 From the chill dew, amongst rude burs and thistles ?  
 Perhaps some cold bank is her bolster now,  
 Or 'gainst the rugged bark of some broad elm  
 Leans her unpillowed head, fraught with sad fears.  
 What if in wild amazement and affright,  
 Or, while we speak, within the direful grasp  
 Of savage hunger, or of savage heat !

ELD. BRO. Peace, brother : be not over-exquisite  
 To cast the fashion of uncertain evils ; 360  
 For, grant they be so, while they rest unknown,  
 What need a man forestall his date of grief,  
 And run to meet what he would most avoid ?  
 Or, if they be but false alarms of fear,  
 How bitter is such self-delusion !  
 I do not think my sister so to seek,  
 Or, so unprincipled in virtue's book,  
 And the sweet peace that goodness bosoms ever,  
 As that the single want of light and noise  
 (Not being in danger, as I trust she is not) 370  
 Could stir the constant mood of her calm thoughts,  
 And put them into misbecoming plight,  
 Virtue could see to do what Virtue would

By her own radiant light, though sun and moon  
 Were in the flat sea sunk. And Wisdom's self  
 Oft seeks to sweet retired solitude,  
 Where, with her best nurse, Contemplation  
 She plumes her feathers, and lets grow her wings,  
 'That in the various bustle of resort  
 Were all to-ruffled, and sometimes impaired,  
 He that has light within his own clear breast  
 May sit i' the centre, and enjoy bright day :  
 But he that hides a dark soul, and foul thoughts,  
 Benighted walks under the mid-day sun ;  
 Himself is his own dungeon.

SEC. BRO. 'Tis most true,  
 That musing Meditation most affects  
 The pensive secrecy of desert cell,  
 Far from the cheerful haunt of men and herds,  
 And sits as safe as in a senate house ;  
 For who would rob a hermit of his weeds.  
 His few books, or his beads, or maple dish,  
 Or do his grey hairs any violence ?  
But Beauty, like the fair Hesperian tree  
 Laden with blooming gold, had need the guard  
 Or dragon-watch with unenchanted eye,  
 To save her blossoms, and defend her fruit,  
 From the rash hand of bold Incontinence.  
 You may as well spread out the unsunned heaps  
 Of miser's treasure by an outlaw's den,  
 And tell me it is safe, as bid me hope  
 Danger will wink on Opportunity,  
 And let a single helpless maiden pass  
 Uninjured in this wild surrounding waste.  
 Of night or loneliness it recks me not ;  
 I fear the dread events that dog them both,

Lest some ill-greeting touch attempt the person  
Of our unowned sister.

ELD. BRO. I do not, brother,  
Infer as if I thought my sister's state  
Secure without all doubt or controversy ;  
Yet, where an equal poise of hope and fear 410  
Does arbitrate the event, my nature is  
That I incline to hope rather than fear,  
And gladly banish squint suspicion.  
My sister is not so defenceless left  
As you imagine ; she has a hidden strength,  
Which you remember not.

SEC. BRO. What hidden strength,  
Unless the strength of Heaven, if you mean that ?

ELD. BRO. I mean that too, but yet a hidden strength,  
Which, if Heaven gave it, may be termed her own.  
'Tis chastity, my brother, chastity : 420  
She that has that is clad in complete steel,  
And, like a quivered nymph with arrows keen,  
May trace huge forests, and unharboured heaths,  
Infamous hills, and sandy perilous wilds ;  
Where, through the sacred rays of chastity,  
No savage fierce, bandite, or mountaineer,  
Will dare to soil her virgin purity,  
Yea, there where very desolation dwells,  
By grotts and caverns shagged with horrid shades,  
She may pass on with unblenched majesty, 430  
Be it not done in pride, or in presumption.  
Some say no evil thing that walks by night,  
In fog or fire, by lake or moorish fen,  
Blue meagre hag, or stubborn unlaid ghost,  
That breaks his magic chains at curfew time,  
No goblin, or swart faery of the mine,

Hath hurtful power o'er true virginity.  
Do you believe me yet, or shall I call  
Antiquity from the old schools of Greece  
To testify the arms of chastity ? 440  
Hence had the huntress Dian her dread bow,  
Fair silver-shafted queen for ever chaste,  
Wherewith she tamed the brindled lioness  
And spotted mountain pard, but set at nought  
The frivolous bolt of Cupid ; gods and men  
Feared her stern frown, and she was queen o' the woods.  
What was that snaky-headed Gorgon shield  
That wise Minerva wore, unconquered virgin,  
Wherewith she freezed her foes to congealed stone,  
But rigid looks of chaste austerity, 450  
And noble grace that dashed brute violence  
With sudden adoration and blank awe ?  
So dear to Heaven is saintly chastity,  
That, when a soul is found sincerely so,  
A thousand liveried angels lackey her,  
Driving far off each thing of sin and guilt,  
And in clear dream and solemn vision  
Tell her of things that no gross ear can hear ;  
Till oft converse with heav'nly habitants  
Begin to cast a beam on the outward shape, 460  
The unpolluted temple of the mind,  
And turns it by degrees to the soul's essence,  
Till all be made immortal. But when lust,  
By unchaste looks, loose gestures, and foul talk,  
But most by lewd and lavish act of sin,  
Lets in defilement to the inward parts,  
The soul grows clotted by contagion,  
Imbodies, and imbrutes, till she quite lose  
The divine property of her first being.  
Such are those thick and gloomy shadows damp 470



Oft seen in charnel vaults and sepulchres,  
 Lingering and sitting by a new-made grave,  
 As loth to leave the body that it loved,  
 And linked itself by carnal sensuality  
 To a degenerate and degraded state.

SEC. BRO. How charming is divine philosophy !  
 Not harsh and crabbed, as dull fools suppose,  
 But musical as is Apollo's lute,  
 And a perpetual feast of nectared sweets,  
 Where no crude surfeit reigns.

ELD. BRO. List ! list ! I hear. 480  
 Some far-off hallow break the silent air.

SEC. BRO. Methought so too ; what should it be ?

ELD. BRO. For certain,  
 Either some one, like us, night-foundered here,  
 Or else some neighbour woodman, or, at worst,  
 Some roving robber calling to his fellows.

SEC. BRO. Heaven keep my sister ! Again, again, and  
 near !  
 Best draw, and stand upon our guard.

ELD. BRO. I'll hallo.  
 If he be friendly, he comes well : if not,  
 Defence is a good cause, and Heav'n be for us !

*Enter the ATTENDANT SPIRIT, habited like a shepherd.*  
 That hallo I should know. What are you ? speak. 490  
 Come not too near ; you fall on iron stakes else.

SPIRIT. What voice is that ? my young Lord ? speak  
 again.

SEC. BRO. O brother, 'tis my father's shepherd, sure.

ELD. BRO. Thyrsis ! whose artful strains have oft de-  
 layed  
 The huddling brook to hear his madrigal,  
 And sweetened every muskrose of the dale.

How camest thou here, good swain ? hath any ram  
 Slipped from the fold, or young kid lost his dam,  
 Or straggling wether the pent flock forsook ?  
 How couldst thou find this dark sequestered nook ? 500

SPIRIT. O my loved master's heir, and his next joy,  
 I came not here on such a trivial toy  
 As a strayed ewe, or to pursue the stealth  
 Of pilfering wolf ; not all the fleecy wealth  
 That doth enrich these downs is worth a thought  
 To this my errand, and the care it brought.  
 But, Oh ! my virgin Lady, where is she ?  
 How chance she is not in your company ?

ELD. BRO. To tell thee sadly, Shepherd, without blame  
 Or our neglect, we lost her as we came. 510

SPIRIT. Ay me unhappy ! then my fears are true.

ELD. BRO. What fears, good Thyrsis ? Prithce briefly  
 shew.

SPIRIT. I'll tell ye ; 'tis not vain or fabulous,  
 (Though so esteemed by shallow ignorance)  
What the sage poets, taught by the heavenly Muse,  
 Storied of old in high immortal verse  
 Of dire Chimeras and enchanted isles,  
 And rifted rocks whose entrance leads to Hell ;  
 For such there be, but unbelief is blind.

Within the navel of this hideous wood, 520  
 Immured in cypress shades, a sorcerer dwells,  
 Of Bacchus and of Circe born, great Comus,  
 Deep skilled in all his mother's witcheries ;  
 And here to every thirsty wanderer  
 By sly enticement gives his baneful cup,  
 With many murmurs mixed whose pleasing poison  
 The visage quite transforms of him that drinks,  
 And the inglorious likeness of a beast

Here the song ends according to the Bridgewater Ms. Of the concluding part of the song containing the good wishes, Prof. Masson comments : "The whole of this poetic blessing on the Severn and its neighbourhood, involving the wish of what we should call 'solid commercial prosperity,' would go to the heart of the assemblage at Ludlow."

l. 942. *Not a waste.....ground* : Let there not be a superfluous or needless sound till we have come to a holier atmosphere.

l. 945. *This gloomy covert* : The Spirit is evidently pointing out of a window of Comus' stately palace into the wood.

l. 949. *gratulate* : welcome.

l. 950. *wished presence* : presence for which they have been yearning.

*and beside* : 'and where, besides.'

l. 952. *jigs* : lively rustic dances.

l. 953. *catch.....spot* : meet them engaged in their merry making.

l. 955. *will.....cheer* : will give them greater delight.

l. 958. Here the scene changes ; when the curtain rises the stage is occupied by peasants engaged in a dance. To them comes the Attendant Spirit with the words : "Back, shepherds, back !"

l. 959. *Enough your play* : We have had enough of your dancing.

l. 960. *duck or nod* : words used to describe the uncouth dancing and awkward bows of rustics.

l. 961. *trippings* : dances to a tripping measure.

l. 962. *lighter toes.....court guise* : These phrases are used to describe the grace of movement of the Lady and her two brothers.

*court guise* : courtly mien.

l. 963. *Mercury* : The herald of the gods, represented as having winged ankles. His name is used here as symbolic both of agility and refinement.

l. 964. *mincing Dryades* : The Dryades are wood-nymphs here described as mincing, tripping with short dainty steps.

Under the ribs of Death : ) but, oh ! ere long  
 Too well I did perceive it was the voice  
 Of my most honoured Lady, your dear sister.  
 Amazed I stood, harrowed with grief and fear ;  
 And ‘ O poor hapless nightingale,’ thought I,  
 ‘ How sweet thou sing’st, how near the deadly snare ! ’  
 Then down the lawns I ran with headlong haste,  
 Through paths and turnings often trod by day,  
 Till, guided by mine ear, I found the place 570  
 Where that damned wizard, hid in sly disguise  
 (For so by certain signs I knew), had met  
 Already, ere my best speed could prevent,  
 The aidless innocent lady, his wished prey ;  
 Who gently asked if he had seen such two,  
 Supposing him some neighbour villager.  
 Longer I durst not say, but soon I guessed  
 Ye were the two she meant ; with that I sprung  
 Into swift flight, till I had found you here ;  
 But further know I not.

SEC. BRO. O Night and Shades, 580  
 How are ye joined with hell in triple knot  
 Against the unarmed weakness of one virgin,  
 Alone and helpless ! Is this the confidence  
 You gave me, brother ?

ELD. BRO. Yes, and keep it still ;  
 Lean on it safely ; not a period  
 Shall be unsaid for me. Against the threats  
 Of malice or of sorcery, or that power  
 Which erring men call Chance, this I hold firm :  
 Virtue may be assailed, but never hurt,  
 Surprised by unjust force, but not enthralled ; 590  
 Yea, even that which Mischief meant most harm  
 Shall in the happy trial prove most glory.

But evil on itself shall back recoil,  
 And mix no more with goodness, when at last,  
 Gathered like scum, and settled to itself,  
 It shall be in eternal restless change  
 Self-fed and self-consumed(: if this fail,  
 The pillared firmament is rottenness,  
 And earth's base built on stubble.) But come, let's on !  
 Against the opposing will and arm of Heaven 600  
 May never this just sword be lifted up ;  
 But, for that damned magician, let him be girt  
 With all the griesly legions that troop  
 Under the sooty flag of Acheron,  
 Harpies and Hydras, or all the monstrous forms  
 'Twixt Africa and Ind.) I'll find him out,  
 And force him to return his purchase back,  
 Or drag him by the curls to a foul death,  
 Cursed as his life.

SPIRIT. Alas ! good venturous youth,  
 I love thy courage yet, and bold emprise ; 610  
 But here thy sword can do thee little stead : .  
 Far other arms and other weapons must  
 Be those that quell the might of hellish charms ;  
 He with his bare wand can unthread thy joints,  
 And crumble all thy sinews.

ELD. BRO. Why, prithee, Shepherd,  
 How durst thou then thyself approach so near  
 As to make this relation ?

SPIRIT. Care and utmost shifts  
 How to secure the lady from surprisal,  
 Brought to my mind a certain shepherd lad  
 Of small regard to see to, yet well skilled 620  
 In every virtuous plant and healing herb  
 That spreads her verdant leaf to the morning ray :

He loved me well, and oft would beg me sing ;  
 Which when I did, he on the tender grass  
 Would sit, and hearken even to ecstasy,  
 And in requital ope his leathern scrip,  
 And show me simples of a thousand names,  
 Telling their strange and vigorous faculties.  
 Amongst the rest a small unsightly root,  
 But of divine effect, he culled me out ; 630  
 The leaf was darkish, and had prickles on it,  
 But in another country, as he said,  
 Bore a bright golden flower, but not in this soil :  
 Unknown, and like esteemed, and the dull swain  
 Treads on it daily with his clouted shoon ;  
 And yet more med'cinal is it than that Moly  
 That Hermes once to wise Ulysses gave. )  
 He called it Haemony, and gave it me,  
 And bade me keep it as of sovran use  
 'Gainst all enchantments, mildew blast, or damp, 640  
 Or ghastly Furies' apparition.  
 I pursed it up, but little reckoning made,  
 Till now that this extremity compelled :  
 But now I find it true ; for by this means  
 I knew the foul enchanter, though disguised,  
 Entered the very lime-twigs of his spells,  
 And yet came off. If you have this about you  
 (As I will give you when we go) you may  
 Boldly assault the necromancer's hall ;  
 Where if he be, with dauntless hardihood 650  
 And brandished blade rush on him : break his glass,  
 And shed the luscious liquor on the ground,  
 But seize his wand ; though he and his cursed crew  
 Fierce sign of battle make, and menace high,  
 Or, like the sons of Vulcan, vomit smoke,

Yet will they soon retire, if he but shrink.

ELD. BRO. Thyrsis, lead on apace ; I'll follow thee ;  
And some good angel bear a shield before us !

[The scene changes to a stately palace, set out with all manner of deliciousness : soft music, tables spread with all dainties. COMUS appears with his rabble, and the LADY set in an enchanted chair ; to whom he offers his glass which she puts by, and goes about to rise.]

COMUS. Nay, Lady, sit {if I but wave this wand,  
Your nerves are all chained up in alabaster, 660  
And you a statue, or as Daphne was,  
Root-bound, that fled Apollo. }

LADY. Fool, do not boast :  
Thou canst not touch the freedom of my mind  
With all thy charms, although this corporal rind  
Thou has immanacled, while Heaven sees good.

COMUS. Why are you vexed, Lady ? why do you frown ?

Here dwell no frowns, nor anger ; from these gates  
Sorrow flies far. See, here be all the pleasures  
That fancy can beget on youthful thoughts,  
When the fresh blood grows lively, and returns 670  
Brisk as the April buds in primrose season.

And first behold this cordial julep here,  
That flames and dances in his crystal bounds,  
With spirits of balm and fragrant syrups mixed.

Not that Nepenthes which the wife of Thone  
in Egypt gave to Jove-born Helena  
s of such power to stir up joy as this,  
To life so friendly, or so cool to thirst.

Why should you be so cruel to yourself,  
And to those dainty limbs, which nature lent 680  
For gentle usage and soft delicacy ?

But you invert the covenants of her trust,  
 And harshly deal, like an ill borrower,  
 With that which you received on other terms ;  
 Scorning the unexempt condition  
 By which all mortal frailty must subsist,  
 Refreshment after toil, ease after pain,  
 That have been tired all day without repast,  
 And timely rest have wanted ; but, fair virgin,  
 This will restore all soon.

LADY. 'Twill not, false traitor ! 690  
 'Twill not restore the truth and honesty  
 That thou hast banished from thy tongue with lies.  
 Was this the cottage and the safe abode  
 Thou told'st me of ? What grim aspects are these,  
 These ugly-headed monsters ? Mercy guard me !  
 Hence with thy brewed enchantments, foul deceiver !  
 Hast thou betrayed my credulous innocence  
 With vizored falsehood and base forgery ?  
 And wouldst thou seek again to trap me here  
 With lickerish baits, fit to ensnare a brute ? 700  
 Were it a draught for Juno when she banquets,  
 I would not taste thy treasonous offer. None  
 But such as are good men can give good things ;  
 And that which is not good is not delicious  
 To a well-governed and wise appetite.

COMUS. ( O foolishness of men ! that lend their ears  
 To those budge doctors of the Stoic fur,  
 And fetch their precepts from the Cynic tub,  
 Praising the lean and sallow Abstinence ! )  
 Wherefore did Nature pour her bounties forth  
 With such a full and unwithdrawing hand,  
 Covering the earth with odours, fruits, and floc  
 Thronging the seas with spawn innumerable,



But all to please and sate the curious taste ?  
 And set to work millions of spinning worms,  
 That in their green shops weave the smooth-haired silk,  
 To deck her sons ; and, that no corner might  
 Be vacant of her plenty, in her own loins  
 She hatched the all-worshipped ore and precious gems,  
 To store her children with. (If all the world 720  
 Should in a pet of temperance feed on pulse, )  
 Drink the clear stream, and nothing wear but frieze,  
 The All-giver would be unthanked, would be unpraised,  
 And we should serve him as a grudging master,  
 As a penurious niggard of his wealth ;  
 And live like Nature's bastards, not her sons,  
 Who would be quite surcharged with her own weight,  
 And strangled with her waste fertility ;  
 The earth cumbered, and the winged air darked with  
 plumes ;  
 The herds would over-multitude their lords, 730  
 The sea o'erfraught would swell, and the unsought diamonds  
 Would so emblaze the forehead of the deep,  
 And so bestud with stars, that they below  
 Would grow inured to light, and come at last  
 To gaze upon the sun with shameless brows.  
 List, Lady ; be not coy, and be not cozened  
 With that same vaunted name, Virginity.  
 ( Beauty is Nature's coin ; must not be hoarded 740  
 But must be current ; and the good thereof  
 Consists in mutual and partaken bliss,  
 Unsavoury in the enjoyment of itself : )  
 If you let slip time, like a neglected rose  
 It withers on the stalk with languished head.  
 Beauty is Nature's brag, and must be shown  
 In courts, at feasts, and high solemnities,

Where most may wonder at the workmanship  
 It is for homely features to keep home,  
 They had their name thence ; coarse complexions  
 And cheeks of sorry grain will serve to ply 750  
 The sampler, and to tease the huswife's wool.  
 What need a vermeil-tinctured lip for that,  
 Love-darting eyes, or tresses like the morn ?  
 There was another meaning in these gifts ;  
 Think what, and be advised ; you are but young yet.

LADY. I had not thought to have unlocked my lips  
 In this unhallowed air, but that this juggler  
 Would think to charm my judgment, as mine eyes,  
 Obtruding false rules pranked in reason's garb.  
 I hate when Vice can bolt her arguments 760  
 And Virtue has no tongue to check her pride.  
 Impostor ! do not charge most innocent Nature,  
 As if she would her children should be riotous  
 With her abundance ; she, good cateress,  
 Means her provision only to the good,  
 That live according to her sober laws,  
 And holy dictate of spare Temperance.  
 If every just man that now pines with want  
 Had but a moderate and beseeeming share  
 Of that which lewdly-pampered Luxury 770  
 Now heaps upon some few with vast excess,  
 Nature's full blessings would be well-dispensed  
 In unsuperfluous even proportion,  
 And she no whit encumbered with her store ;  
And then the Giver would be better thanked,  
 His praise due paid : for swinish gluttony  
 Ne'er looks to Heaven amidst his gorgeous feast,  
 But with besotted base ingratitude  
 Crams, and blasphemes his Feeder.) Shall I go on ?

Or have I said enow ? To him that dares  
Arm his profane tongue with contemptuous words 780  
Against the sun-clad power of chastity,  
Fain would I something say ;—yet to what end ?  
Thou hast nor ear, nor soul, to apprehend  
The sublime notion and high mystery  
That must be uttered to unfold the sage  
And serious doctrine of Virginity ;  
And thou art worthy that thou shouldst know  
More happiness than this thy present lot.  
Enjoy your dear wit, and gay rhetoric, 790  
That hath so well been taught her dazzling fence ;  
Thou are not fit to hear thyself convinced :  
Yet, should I try, the uncontrolled worth  
Of this pure cause would kindle my rapt spirits  
To such a flame of sacred vehemence,  
That dumb things would be moved to sympathize,  
And the brute Earth would lend her nerves, and shake,  
Till all thy magic structures, reared so high,  
Were shattered into heaps o'er thy false head.  
Comus. She fables not. I feel that I do fear 800  
Her words set off by some superior power ;  
And, though not mortal, yet a cold shuddering dew  
Dips me all o'er, as when the wrath of Jove  
Speaks thunder and the chains of Erebus  
To some of Saturn's crew. ) I must dissemble,  
And try her yet more strongly.—Come, no more !  
This is mere moral babble, and direct  
Against the canon laws of our foundation ;  
I must not suffer this ; yet 'tis but the lees  
And settlings of a melancholy blood : 810  
But this will cure all straight ; one sip of this  
Will bathe the drooping spirits in delight

Beyond the bliss of dreams. Be wise, and taste....

[The BROTHERS rush in with swords drawn, wrest his glass out of his hand, and break it against the ground : his rout make sign of resistance, but are all driven in. The ATTENDANT SPIRIT comes it.]

SPIRIT. What ! have you let the false enchanter escape ?  
O ye mistook ; ye should have snatched his wand,  
And bound him fast : without his rod reversed,  
And backward mutters of dissevering power,  
We cannot free the Lady that sits here  
In stony fetters fixed and motionless.  
Yet stay : be not disturbed ; now I bethink me, 820  
Some other means I have which may be used,  
Which once of Meliboeus old I learnt,  
The soothest shepherd that e'er piped on plains.

There is a gentle nymph not far from hence,  
That with moist curb sways the smooth Severn stream :  
Sabrina is her name : a virgin pure ;  
Whilom she was the daughter of Lochrine,  
That had the sceptre from his father Brute.  
She, guiltless damsel, flying the mad pursuit  
Of her enraged stepdame, Guendolen, 830  
Commended her fair innocence, to the flood  
That stayed her flight with his cross-flowing course.  
The water nymphs, that in the bottom played,  
Held up their pearled wrist, and took her in,  
Bearing her straight to aged Nereus' hall ;  
Who, piteous of her woes, reared her lank head,  
And gave her to his daughters to imbathe  
In nectared lavers strewed with asphodil,  
And through the porch and inlet of each sense  
Dropt in ambrosial oils, till she revived, 840  
And underwent a quick immortal change,

Made goddess of the river. Still she retains  
 Her maiden gentleness, and oft at eve  
 Visits the herds along the twilight meadows,  
 Helping all urchin blasts, and ill-luck signs  
 That the shrewd meddling elf delights to make,  
 Which she with precious vial'd liquors heals :  
 For which the shepherds at their festivals  
 Carol her goodness loud in rustic lays,  
 And throw sweet garland wreaths into her stream 850  
 Of pansies, pinks, and gaudy daffodils.  
 And, as the old swain said, she can unlock  
 The clapsing charm, and thaw the numbing spell,  
 If she be right invoked in warbled song ;  
 For maidenhood she loves, and will be swift  
 To aid a virgin, such as was herself,  
 In hard-besetting need :) this will I try,  
 And add the power of some adjuring verse.

*Song*

Sabrina fair,  
 Listen where thou art sitting 860  
 Under the glassy, cool, translucent wave,  
 In twisted braids of lilies knitting  
 The loose train of thy amber-dropping hair ;  
 Listen for dear honour's sake,  
 Goddess of the silver lake,  
 Listen and save !

Listen and appear to us,  
 In name of great Oceanus,  
 ( By the earth-shaking Neptune's mace,  
 And Tethys' grave majestic pace ; 870  
 By hoary Nereus' wrinkled look,  
 And the Carpathian wizard's hook ;  
 By scaly Triton's winding shell,

And old soothsaying Glaucus' spell ; )  
 ( By Leucothea's lovely hands,  
 And her son that rules the strands ; )  
 By Thetis' tinsel slippered feet,  
 And the songs of Sirens sweet ;  
 ( By dead Parthenope's dear tomb,  
 And fair Ligea's golden comb, )  
 Wherewith she sits on diamond rocks  
 Sleeking her soft alluring locks ;  
 By all the nymphs that nightly dance  
 Upon thy streams with wily glance ;  
 Rise, rise, and heave thy rosy head  
 From thy coral-paven bed,  
 And bridle in thy headlong wave,  
 Till thou our summons answered have.

880

Listen and save !

[SABRINA rises, attended by Water-nymphs, and sings.]  
 By the rushy-fringed bank,  
 890  
 Where grows the willow and the osier dank,  
 My sliding chariot stays,  
 Thick set with agate, and the azurn sheen  
 Of turkis blue, and emerald green,  
 That in the channel strays :  
 Whilst from off the waters fleet  
 Thus I set my printless feet  
 O'er the cowslip's velvet head,  
 That bends not as I tread.  
 Gentle swain, at thy request  
 900  
 I am here !

SPIRIT. Goddess dear  
 We implore thy powerful hand  
 To undo the charmed band  
 Of true virgin here distrest,

Through the force and through the wile  
Of unblest enchanter vile.

SABRINA. Shepherd, 'tis my office best  
To help ensnared chastity :

Brightest Lady, look on me 910

Thus I sprinkle on thy breast

Drops that from my fountain pure

I have kept of precious cure ;

Thrice upon the finger's tip,

Thrice upon thy rubied lip :

Next this marbled venom'd seat,

Smeared with gums of glutinous heat,

I touch with chaste palms moist and cold.

Now the spell hath lost his hold ;

And I must haste, ere morning hour 920

To wait in Amphitrite's bower.

[SABRINA descends, and THE LADY rises out of her seat.]

SPIRIT. Virgin, daughter of Locrine,  
Sprung of old Anchises' line,

May thy brimmed waves for this

Their full tribute never miss

From a thousand petty rills,

That tumble down the snowy hills :

Summer drouth or singed air

Never scorch thy tresses fair,

Nor wet October's torrent flood 930

Thy molten crystal fill with mud ;

May thy billows roll ashore

The beryl and the golden ore ;

May thy lofty head be crowned

With many a tower and terrace round,

And here and there thy banks upon

With groves of myrrh and cinnamon.

Come, Lady, while Heaven lends us grace,  
Let us fly this cursed place,  
Lest the sorcerer us entice 940  
With some other new device.  
Not a waste or needless sound  
Till we come to holier ground ;  
I shall be your faithful guide  
Through this gloomy covert wide ;  
And not many furlongs thence  
Is your Father's residence,  
Where this night are met in state  
Many a friend to gratulate  
His wished presence, and beside 950  
All the swains that there abide  
With jigs and rural dance resort ;  
We shall catch them at their spot,  
And our sudden coming there  
Will double all their mirth and cheer.  
Come, let us haste ; the stars grow high,  
But Night sits monarch yet in the mid sky.

[The Scene changes, presenting Ludlow Town and the President's Castle : then come in Country Dancers ; after them the ATTENDANT SPIRIT, with the two BROTHERS and THE LADY.]

*Song*

SPIRIT. Back, Shepherds, back ! enough your play,  
Till next sunshine holiday :  
Here be, without duck or nod, 960  
Other trippings to be trod  
Of lighter toes, and such court guise  
As Mercury did first devise  
With the mincing Dryades  
On the lawns and on the leas.



[This second Song presents them to their Father and Mother.]

Noble Lord, and Lady bright,  
I have brought ye new delight ;  
Here behold so goodly grown  
Three fair branches of your own :  
Heaven hath timely tried their youth. 970  
Their faith, their patience, and their truth,  
And sent them here through hard assays  
With a crown of deathless praise,  
To triumph in victorious dance  
O'er sensual folly and intemperance.

[The dances ended, the SPIRIT epiloguizes.]

SPIRIT. To the ocean now I fly,  
And those happy climes that lie  
Where day never shuts his eye,  
Up in the broad fields of the sky ;  
There I suck the liquid air, 980  
All amidst the gardens fair  
Of Hesperus, and his daughters three  
That sing about the golden tree. )  
Along the criped shades and bowers  
Revels the spruce and jocund Spring ;  
The Graces and the rosy-bosomed Hours  
Thither all their bounties bring ;  
There eternal Summer dwells,  
And west winds with musky wing  
About the cedarn alleys fling 990  
Nard and cassia's balmy smells.  
Iris there with humid bow  
Waters the odorous banks, that blow  
Flowers of more mingled hue  
Than her purpled scarf can shew ;  
And drenches with Elysian dew

(List mortals, if your ears be true)  
 Beds of hyacinth and roses,  
 Where young Adonis oft reposes,  
 Waxing well of his deep wound 1000  
 In slumber soft, and on the ground  
 Sadly sits the Assyrian queen :)  
 But far above in spangled sheen  
 Celestial Cupid, her famed son advanced,  
 Holds his dear Psyche sweet entranced,  
 After her wandering labours long,  
 Till free consent the gods among  
 Make her his eternal bride,  
 And from her fair unspotted side  
 Two blissful twins are to be born, 1010  
 Youth and Joy ; so Jove hath sworn.

But now my task is smoothly done :  
 I can fly, or I can run,  
 Quickly to the green earth's end,  
 Where the bowed welkin slow doth bend,  
 And from thence can soar as soon  
 To the corners of the moon.

Mortals, that would follow me,  
 Love Virtue : she alone is free ;  
 She can teach ye how to climb 1020  
 Higher than the sphery chime ;  
 Or if Virtue feeble were,  
 Heaven itself would stoop to her.



## COMUS

### TEXTUAL NOTES

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*The first scene* : This was a painted scene.

*discovers* : reveals. Cf. F. de'couvrir.

*The Attendant Spirit descends* : The Cambridge Ms. has the alternative reading 'a guardian spirit or demon.' These words explain the office of this character. "The spirit also serves the purpose of dispelling from the first any suggestion of tragedy, leaving the mind free for the angelic teaching of *Comus*."

*Descends* : obviously from some background looking like a hill.

We understand from the Bridgewater Ms. that when *Comus* was first acted the arrival of the Attendant Spirit was heralded by music. The song consisted of lines 976—1011, with only one slight change to suit the context, viz., "To the Ocean now I fly" was replaced by "from the heavens now I fly." This transposition was evidently made by Lawes for a musical purpose, since it gave a better stage effect. But the lines are more in their place as the epilogue to the play. They emphasize the moral of *Comus*.

l. 1. *starry threshold* : Cf. P. L. Bk. IV. "The road of heaven star-paved." l. 976.

*court* : palace.

l. 2. *mansion* : abode. The word literally means 'a place of tarrying.' Cf. P. L. II. 402, 'this ill mansion.'

*those* : 'of whom all have heard'. Further particularization of such well-known beings is needless.

l. 3. *bright aerial spirits* : Cf. l. 299, 'gay creatures of the element'. *aerial* : living in air.

*live insphered* : live in their allotted sphere. The word 'insphered' is used with reference to the Ptolemaic

system of astronomy which regarded the Earth as the centre of the universe and as being encircled by ten concentric spheres. The sphere in which the 'immortal shapes' live is presumably the outermost one, nearest heaven. Cf. Shelley's *Adonais* where the poet represents the soul of Keats as ascending to its sphere in Heaven :

" 'Thou art become as one of us,' they cry ;  
 ' It was for thee yon kingless sphere has long  
 Swung blind in unascended majesty,  
 Silent, alone, amid a Heaven of song '."

l. 4. *regions.....air* : Milton's heaven is a windless and serene place, like the heaven of Greek mythology. Cf. Homer's *Odyssey* : "Not by winds is it shaken, nor ever met with rain, nor doth snow come nigh thereto, but most clear air is spread about it cloudless, and the white light floats over it. Therein the blessed gods are glad for all their days."

*serene* : bright or unclouded. The two epithets *calm* and *serene* are not synonymous ; they are respectively contrasted with 'stir' and 'smoke' of line 5.

Between lines 4 and 5 the Cambridge Ms. had fourteen beautiful lines which Milton rejected :

In regions mild of calm and serene air  
 Amidst the Hesperian gardens, on whose banks  
 Bedew'd with nectar and celestial songs  
 Eternal roses grow and hyacinth  
 And fruits of golden rind, on whose fair tree  
 The scaly-harness'd dragon ever keeps  
 His unenchanted eye ; around the verge  
 And sacred limits of this blissful isle  
 The jealous ocean, that old river, winds  
 His far extended arms, till with steep fall  
 Half his waste flood the wild Atlantic fills  
 And half the slow unfathom'd Stygian pool.  
 I doubt me, gentle mortals, these may seem  
 Strange distances to hear, and unknown climes.  
 But soft, I was not sent to court your wonder  
 With distant worlds and strange removed climes.  
 Yet thence I come, and oft from thence behold  
 The smoke and stir " etc.

None but Milton could have written such a passage, and no one but Milton could have removed it. Prof. Mackail comments on it thus : "In this magnificent passage we have the potential Milton of *Paradise Lost*.....But in its

place Milton felt the passage to be overworked ; and with a single stroke of his pen, half of it, and that in itself the most splendid half, disappeared. But for the chance preservation of the autograph manuscript, we should know nothing of a passage which perhaps as much as any single one in Milton's whole work combines the perfection of the classical with the perfection of the romantic manner."

l. 5. *this dim spot* : This is a description of the Earth just as it would appear to "those immortal shapes" whose company he has just quitted. The Earth is *dim* with smoke and distance.

l. 6. *and with* : the construction here is irregular ; instead of a relative clause a new co-ordinate clause is put here for elegance. Such Grecisms are quite common in Milton. Cf. l. 26, 'and gives them leave.' The line grammatically should be : "and (where they) with" etc.

*low-thoughted care* : concern about the material things of life ; narrow-minded anxiety.

l. 7. *confined.....pinfold* : penned up and hampered in this cramped space, the Earth, like cattle in the pound.

*pestor* : literally means 'to shackle a horse by the foot when it is at pasture.'

*pinfold* : 'an enclosure in which stray cattle are pounded or shut up.' The word is a corruption of *pound-fold*.

l. 8. *strive to keep up* : The idea is that men cling to the Earth too long, "instead of being glad, when death comes, to change this life for a better."

*frail and feverish* : Implying the insecurity of earthly existence.

*frail* : ending too suddenly and unexpectedly.

*feverish* : full of unrest.

l. 9. *the crown that virtue gives* : the ultimate and lasting reward of a virtuous life.

l. 10. *this mortal change* : this phrase is variously interpreted. Prof. Masson takes it to mean "this mortal state of life" as distinguished from the future state of immortality. Some interpret it as 'this change from mortality.' The

best interpretation is Prof. Elton's 'this wellknown transformation through death.'

l. 11. *Amongst.....seats* : The idea and language are scriptural. Cf. *Revelation*, IV, 4. "And round about the throne were four-and-twenty seats, and upon the seats I saw four-and-twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment ; and on their heads crowns of gold."

This picture of the blessed mansions is full of classical and scriptural suggestions. We have noted the passage in the *Odyssey* which contains a similar description, and the passage in the *Revelation*. This blending of Christian sentiments with the associations of pagan mythology is a characteristic of Milton's poetry. "His mind was steeped in knowledge of the Bible and the classics, and what he writes is coloured now by one influence, now by the other, and often by both together in a way that seems to us sometimes quite incongruous. Thus in *Comus* and *Lycidas* we are moving in a pagan world where the deities of Greek and Latin mythology reign ; nevertheless the scriptural influence is often, if not always, present."

l. 12. *yet some etc.* : usually men are unmindful of the crown that virtue gives ; still there are some who aspire etc.

*by due steps* : by following the appointed path.

l. 13. *their just hands* : their righteous hands. Or, *just* can be taken as qualifying the predicate—'to lay their hands with justice'.

*that golden key* : the same idea as in *Lycidas*, l. 111.

"Two massy keys he bore of metals twain,  
(The *golden* opes, the iron shuts amain)."

l. 14. *opes.....eternity* : opens the gates of heaven.

l. 15. *errand* : business ; message.

*but for such* : unless it were to benefit them. 'except on their account.'

l. 16. *ambrosial needs* : heavenly garment. *Ambrosial* is used by Milton also in the sense of immortal.

*soil.....weeds* : stain the purity of my heavenly raiment.

l. 17. *rank vapours* : noisome exhalations.

*sinworn mould* : Sin-corrupted world. But *mould* as used by Milton generally means 'substance'. Hence Verity suggests that *mould* here means 'flesh,' the Attendant Spirit having assumed the form of a mortal. \*

l. 18. *to my task* : I must proceed to my task.

*Neptune.....by lot* : The allusion is to the story of the division of the empire described in the *Iliad*. On the dethronement of Saturn, his empire was distributed among his three sons, Jupiter, Neptune, and Pluto. Neptune says in Bk. XV of the *Iliad* : "For three brethren are we, and sons of Kronos, whom Rhea fare.....and in three lots are all things divided, and each drew a domain of his own, and to me fell the hoary sea, to be my habitation for ever, when we shook the lots."

l. 19. *the sway of each ebbing stream* : the dominion over the streams of the world which bring to Neptune at the ebb a tribute of fresh waters.

l. 20. *took in* : accepted as his share.

*by lot* : as is narrated in the extract quoted above.

*high and nether Jove* : High Jove is Jupiter, to whom was allotted heaven. Nether Jove or Stygian Jove is Pluto.

The line should be properly punctuated thus :

"Took in by lot, 'twixt etc."

'*twixt* refers to the Kingdom of Neptune, who had the sea that lay 'twixt the two.

Or, *by lot 'twixt* can be explained as meaning 'by agreement between.'

l. 21. *sea-girt isles* : islands surrounded by the ocean. The whole description is reminiscent of the speech of John of Gaunt in *Richard II*, where England is described as 'a precious stone set in the silver sea.'

ll. 22-23. *like to.....deep* : 'The sea is the plain setting, unadorned save for the gem-like isles.'

l. 24. *to grace* : to show favour to.

*tributary gods* : the gods who acknowledge him as overlord.

l. 25. *by course* : in proper order.



*commits to several Government* : assigns to each his separate dominion.

*several* : separate or distinct.

ll. 24-25 : Neptune assigns each island to the government of some particular sea-deity—all these rulers offering homage to him as overlord.

l. 26. *sapphire crowns* : this colour is usually associated with the sea.

l. 27. *little tridents* : as contrasted with the trident of Neptune of whom Ben Jonson writes : “with his trident touch the stars.”

l. 28. *this isle* : Great Britain.

*of all the main* : in the whole ocean.

l. 29. *quarters* : allots. The word need not mean ‘divides into four parts.’ Some however regard this as referring to the fact that, “at that time the island was actually divided into four separate governments : for besides those at London and Edinburgh, there were Lords Presidents of the North and of Wales.”

*blue-haired deities* : ‘as partaking of sea-colour.’ But obviously Milton refers here to a particular section of Neptune’s tributary gods to whom is entrusted the care of Great Britain. Masson asks : “Can there be a recollection of blue as the British colour, inherited from the old times of blue-stained Britons who fought with Caesar ? Green-haired is the usual epithet for Neptune and his subordinates.”

l. 30. *all this tract* : Referring to Wales.

*that fronts the falling sun* : that looks towards the West.

l. 31. *a noble peer* : the Earl of Bridgewater who had been appointed as President of the Council of Wales in 1631. In 1634 the Earl went to his official seat of Ludlow, to enter on his duties. It was in the great hall in Ludlow in the same year that *Comus* was acted. The Earl was present on the occasion. This passage is a tribute to the Earl himself.

*of mickle trust and power* : that the Earl of Bridgewater was held in high esteem is seen from the fact that before he became Lord President of Wales he had served in various important public and private offices. *mickle* : much.

Such flattering allusions constitute a marked feature of Masques.

*l. 32. with tempered awe* : with firmness tempered by kindness.

*to guide* : Euphemism for 'to govern.' Really the Earl's powers were unlimited and he had come to his official seat having got them clearly defined.

*l. 33. an old and haughty nation* : the Welsh. They are rightly described as an old nation. They were the first inhabitants of Great Britain. Their pride in arms was experienced by the Romans and the Saxons when they invaded Britain. One can also remember the stout resistance which the Welsh offered to Edward I when he attempted to subjugate them.

*l. 34. nursed in princely lore* : properly instructed as befits their high station in life. "In this phrase some find an allusion to a link with Royalty at a remote point in the pedigree of the Egerton family ; others find a reference to the fact that the young people had been a good deal at Court. The more natural meaning, however, is simply 'highly-educated.' "

*l. 35. their father's state* : Probably refers to the ceremonies connected with the installation of the Earl as Lord President.

*l. 37. perplexed* : tangled.

*drear wood* : gloomy forest.

*l. 38. The nodding.....brows* : The leafage on the trees is pictured as hair nodding on threatening brows.

*horror* : terrible appearance.

*shady-brows* : Referring to the trees and bushes overhanging the paths in the wood.

*l. 39. forlorn* : lost utterly in the forest.

*l. 40. their tender age* : Lady Alice Egerton was only fourteen years old ; the two brothers were younger still.

*l. 41. But that* : but for the fact that.

*quick command* : command that must be carried out quickly.

*from sovran Jove* : The Attendant Spirit here proclaims himself as the messenger of Jove.

*l. 43. And listen why* : This is addressed by the character directly to the audience. Dr. Johnson condemns such a mode of imparting information as undramatic, as "so contrary to the nature of dramatic representation, that no precedents can support it."

*l. 44. what.....song* : The poet contends that the plot of his masque is entirely original. It is not to be found in any ancient or modern tale or song.

*hall or bower* : The hall of the chieftain and the bower of the lady. This claim to originality need not be taken seriously ; it is merely one of the time-honoured conventions derived from classical poetry. (For understanding the indebtedness of Milton to other writers, see Introduction.)

*ll. 1-45.* The introductory speech of the Attendant Spirit serves as the prologue to the masque. It explains the occasion of the masque as also the purpose of the play. The speech can be divided into three portions, *ll. 1-17* forming the *Overture*, *ll. 18-45* the *Compliment*, and *ll. 46-92* the *Exposition*. The Attendant Spirit explains who he is and the errand on which he has come. He also hints at the plot of the whole masque, incidentally complimenting the Earl in whose honour the masque is acted. The prologue is modelled on those of Euripides, which are often spoken by superhuman personages, who preface the exposition by an account of themselves.

*l. 46.* The poet invents a genealogy for Comus. The parents of Comus are Bacchus, the god of wine and the sorceress Circe. In *L'Allegro* Milton says that Mirth was the offspring of the union of Bacchus and Love ; but from the union of Bacchus and Circe was born the gay voluptuary, Comus whose flattering speech and pleasant manners concealed his seductive and magical powers. This parentage which the poet gives to Comus is significant. The masque represents the triumph of Chastity and Reason over Intemperance and Enchantment. Comus is the embodiment of the latter qualities, and hence is regarded as the offspring of parents "representing the pleasure of man's lower nature and the

misuse of man's higher powers on behalf of falsehood and impiety."

The character Comus appears in the plays of many other earlier dramatists. In the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus Comus figures as a 'drinker of human blood'; Ben Jonson in *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* identified Comus with the belly. Dekker represents him as 'the clerk of gluttony's kitchen'; In Massinger he is 'the god of pleasure.' Erycius Putaneus pictures him as 'a graceful reveller, the genius of Love and Cheerfulness.'

But Milton's character is quite different from all these. As Prof. Masson remarks: "Milton's Comus is a creation of his own, for which he was as little indebted intrinsically to Putaneus as to Ben Jonson. For the purpose of his masque at Ludlow Castle he was bold enough to add a brand-new god, no less to the classic Pantheon, and to import him into Britain."

*Bacchus* : The god of wine. He was also called Dionysus from Nysa, the isle where he was brought up.

l. 47. *Crushed* : extracted.

*misused* : abused.

l. 48. *After.....transformed* : A Latinism. After the transformation of the Tuscan mariners. The allusion here is to the tale touched on in the Hymn of Homer to Dionysus. The same story is more fully told in Ovid, *Met.* III. The Tuscan sailors who attempted to betray Bacchus and sell him as a slave, were driven mad and in that condition threw themselves into the sea; they were later changed into dolphins. In Smith's *Classical Dictionary* the story is narrated more fully: "He hired a ship which belonged to Tyrrhenian pirates; but the men, instead of landing at Naxos, steered towards Asia, to sell him there as a slave. Thereupon the god changed the mast and oars into serpents, and himself into a lion; ivy grew round the vessel, and the sound of flutes was heard on every side, the sailors were seized with madness, leaped into the sea; and were metamorphosed into dolphins."

*Tuscan* : So called because Tyrhenia in Central Italy

was called Tuscia by the Romans ; this province included modern Tuscany.

*l. 49. as the winds listed* : at the pleasure of the winds ; as the winds chose.

*l. 50. Circe's island* : Aeaea, off the coast of Latium.  
*fell* : came upon.

*Circe*, Homer describes this sorceress as the daughter of Helios, the Sun-God, and the nymph Perse who dwelt in Aeaea. Ulysses in the course of his wanderings after the Trojan war visited her. Half of his companions were transformed into swine, and were recovered by him only after an year's sojourn. Milton uses this legend, altering it in many essentials to suit his purpose. "The bringing of Bacchus to Circe's island is Milton's own invention, with a view to the parentage he had resolved on for Comus." He makes use of the idea of Circe as a fair enchantress transforming with her 'charmed cup' all mortals that came to her island into the 'herd that grazed.' But in the mixing up of the Sirens with Circe Milton departs from the original.

Milton's story is also reminiscent of the descriptions of the Bower of Acrasia in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, Bk. II, and Tasso's description of the Bower of Armida in canto 15 of *Ger. Lib.*

*l. 51. charmed cup*      liquor rendered magical.

*whose.....whoever*      This use of the double relative is a Latinism.

*l. 52. lost his upright shape* : Cf. Homer's *Odyssey*. "Now when she had given them the cup and they had drunk it off, presently she smote them with a wand, and in the stys of the swine she penned them. So they had the head and voice, the bristles and the shape of swine, but their mind abode even as of old." Assumed the shape of brutes.

*l. 54. his clustering locks* : his hair hanging in clustering curls. Bacchus is here represented as the type of manly beauty.

*l. 55. with ivy berries wreathed* : crowned with a wreath of vine and ivy, symbolic of his being the god of wine.

*his blithe youth* : his fresh young figure.

l. 56. *ere he parted thence* : before he left the island.

l. 57. *but his mother more* : but more like his mother. Comus inherited more the qualities of his mother than those of his father. It is on this idea of Comus that the whole story is based.

l. 58. *therefore she* : because he was the embodiment of ensnaring lust rather than of innocent jollity.

l. 59. *frolic of* : frolicsome or jovial because of.

l. 60. *Celtic and Iberian fields* : Gaul and Spain. As great wine producing countries they were appropriate for Bacchus.

l. 61. *ominous* : Literally 'full of portents or magical appearances.'

l. 62. *in thick.....imbowered* : Sheltered by the dark recesses of the wood.

l. 65. *orient* : bright ; Lat. Oriens—rising (as applied to the Sun). Secondly it came to mean 'bright' or 'shining.'

l. 66. *the draught of Phoebus* : the thirst caused by the oppressive heat of the sun. Phoebus is Apollo, the Sun-God.

l. 67. *fond* : foolish.

*fond intemperate thirst* : foolish people who indulge their thirst intemperately, that is with the aid of intoxicating drinks.

l. 68. *potion* : poisonous draught.

l. 69. *express.....gods* : the clearly-stamped image of the gods. Cf. *Genesis*, I. 27, 'so god created man in his own image'.

*express* : distinct ; exact.

l. 71. *ounce* : A wild animal allied to the panther and the cheetah.

Milton here accepts the traditional account, not warranted by the text of Homer that the wild beasts which Circe charmed by her magic were once human beings.

l. 72. *all other.....were* : In the *Odyssey* the bodies also of those who were transformed were changed ; here change affects only their countenance. For as Prof. Elton suggests : "It was easier for actors to wear animal mask on the head

only." The stage direction for this scene is : " headed like sundry sorts of wild beasts, but otherwise like men and women."

l. 73. *perfect* : complete, since it affects the mind also.  
*misery* : miserable transformation.

l. 74. *not.....disfigurement* : The story in Homer is different. The companions of Ulysses who are transformed are conscious of the change that has come over them and they weep in their pen. The allegory is improved by Milton here, emphasizing as it does the completeness of the power of Comus and the irresistible nature of the pleasure he has to offer.

l. 75. *boast.....before* : with the gratifying fancy that the change has made them more attractive than before.

l. 76. *all.....forget* : this was the effect ascribed to the Lotus in the *Odyssey*. " Now whosoever of them did eat the honey-sweet fruit of the lotus had no more wish to bring tidings, nor to come back, but there he chose to abide with the lotus-eating men, ever feeding on the lotus and forgetful of his homeward way."

l. 77. *roll.....sty* : feel self-satisfied in their bestial state and in the indulgence of all their sensual cravings.

l. 79. *adventurous* : full of perils and stirring events.

l. 80. *swift.....star* : Cf. P. L. Bk. IV. l. 556.

" Swift as a shooting star  
In autumn thwarts the night."

*glancing.....star* : shooting star or meteor.

Note the appropriateness of the simile. The spirit bathed in light darting quickly from heaven to Earth is compared to the bright meteor shooting through space.

Note also how the rhythm of the line suits the sense in it.

l. 81. *convoy* : escort.

l. 82. *put off* : lay aside.

l. 83. *sky-robcs* : Cf. the " ambrosial weeds " of l. 16. Heavenly raiment or dress.

*spun out of Iris' woof* : rainbow hued. Iris is the goddess of the rainbow. Cf. P.L. XI. 244. " Iris has dipped the woof."

The Attendant Spirit probably wore on the stage a robe of shot silk, rainbow-hued.

l. 84. *take.....swain* : assume the dress and appearance of a peasant.

l. 85. *that.....belongs* : who is serving in this household.

l. 86. *with his soft.....song* : The musician Lawes acted both the parts of the Attendant Spirit and Thyrsis and is thus made to repeat the compliment written for him by Milton.

*soft.....pipe* : The conventional oaten pipe of free pastoral poetry.

*smooth-dittied song* : sweetly worded song.

l. 87. *well.....roar* : who by his songs can calm even raging storms.

l. 88. *nor of less.....occasion* : "Nor less loyal than he is songful ; and by virtue of his duty of watching on the hills, closest and most likely friend to give the instant aid that is now needed."

l. 89. *likeliest* : most suited. There will be nothing incongruous, if he comes to the timely help of the forlorn travellers in this wood.

*nearest.....occasion* : 'nearest at hand to bend the help that this occasion requires.'

l. 92. *viewless* : invisible.

With these words the Attendant Spirit moves away from the stage, and Comus enters with his followers.

The song of Comus resembles in tone and measure *L'Allegro*. It is an invitation to a life of pleasure and jollity.

l. 93. *the star* : the evening star. Cf. the converse description of the morning-star in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* : 'Look, the unfolding star calls up the shepherd.'

l. 94. *top of heaven doth hold* : has risen far above the horizon, reaching the zenith.

l. 95. *gilded car of day* : The golden chariot of Apollo, the Sun-God.

l. 96. *his glowing.....allay* : Milton refers to the 'burning axle-tree' of the Sun in the *Hymn of the Nativity*. The



axle-tree of the gilded car is glowing with the heat of day, and it is cooled in the waters of the ocean.

*allay* : cool.

l. 97. *in the.....stream* : The ancients believed that the setting of the sun in the Atlantic Ocean was accompanied with a hissing noise.

*steep* : This is an optical illusion. "Just as the sun goes down behind the sea, the waters are darkish, but for one wide road of light, which seems to rise *steep* from the spectator to the disappearing sun." 'Steep' is interpreted by some as meaning 'deep'.

*Atlantic stream* : This alludes to the idea held by the ancients that the ocean was a great river flowing for ever round the world.

l. 98. *slope sun* : The sun sinking down the slope of the horizon. In such a position its rays will shoot up into the sky.

l. 99. *the dusky pole* : 'The zenith, top of heaven, which darkens as the sun withdraws, save for a last shaft of light.'

l. 100. *pacing.....goal* : moving towards the other goal, viz. the Eastern end of his course. The imagery here is reminiscent of the *Psalms*, XIX, 5. "The sun as a bridegroom cometh out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race."

l. 102. Compare this call upon Mirth and Pleasure with that of *L'Allegro*. There is in both the same tripping measure and even the same turns of expression. In small details however the contrast is worked out.

l. 103. *midnight shout and revelry* : contrast the pleasures of *L'Allegro* which begin with the sunrise.

l. 104. *tipsy dance* : Contrast with 'the light fantastic toe' of *L'Allegro*.

*jollity* : Boisterous mirth.

l. 105. *braid.....twine* : 'entwine your hair with wreaths of roses.'

*rosy twine* : wreathed roses.

l. 106. *dropping.....wine* : exhaling sweet fragrances and moist with wine.

*l. 107. rigour* : viz. of a strict moral code. Such personifications of abstractions are very many in *Comus*.

*l. 108. advice* : sober judgment.

*with scrupulous head* : full of scruples.

*l. 109. strict age* : old age with its characteristic Puritan outlook on life.

*sour severity* : austere and morose temper.

*l. 110. saws* : counsels ; sententious maxims, proverbs.

Such pleasures as *Comus* offers can be enjoyed only when the Puritans of the world with their strict-laced morality and their sententious maxims have gone to bed. For such people are kill-joys. They not only miserable, but delight in seeing others miserable as well !

*l. 111. of purer fire* : possessing a diviner nature, or, belonging to the purer element, fire. The old theory was that the earth was composed of four elements—earth, water, air and fire. The last two were the habitation of the gods.

*l. 112. the starry quire* : The stars which move harmoniously each in its sphere, and produce the music of the spheres—a very common poetic conception. Cf. *The Merchant of Venice*.

“ There’s not the smallest orb which thou behold’st  
But in his motion like an angel sings,  
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins.”

*quire* : Concert. A variation of ‘ choir.’

*l. 113. nightly watchful spheres* : The stars are the eyes of heaven keeping watch at night.

*l. 114. head.....years* : they revolve round the earth and thus indicate the lapse of time upon it. “ The months and years dance a round after the stars and come round again with them.” Cf. *P. L. III. 579*.

“ They as they move,  
Their starry dance in numbers that compute  
Days, months, and years.”

*l. 115. The sounds and seas* : all nature too joins in the dance.

*sounds* : straits.

*finny drove* : innumerable fish.

*l. 116. to the moon* : In response to the influence of the moon. This alludes to the effect of moonlight upon water ; or, it may be a reference to the influence of the moon on the tides.

*in wavering morrice move* : quiver in an undulating dance.

*morrice* : morris-dance, a country dance usually performed in the rustic festivities at Whitsuntide and May-day. The name indicates its origin. It was a moorish dance, brought into Spain by the Moors, and thence introduced into England.

*l. 117. tawny* : of a dark yellowish colour.

*shelves* : flat ledges of rock on the shore.

*l. 118. pert* : lively. *trip* : dance to a tripping measure.

*dapper* : quick-footed. It may also mean 'neat.'

*l. 119. dimpled brook* : Brook with gentle ripples on its surface.

*l. 120. trim* : neat.

*l. 121. wakes.....wake* : Originally meant "the feast of the dedication of a church, formerly kept by watching all night." Later came to mean an evening merry-making often continued till late in the night.

*l. 122. what.....sleep* ? this is the time to be gay, not to sleep. For, Comus says, "Now alone are we free from the prying eyes of Puritans."

*l. 123. to prove* : to test. There are far more pleasant things than sleep which we can test during night.

*l. 124. Venus.....Love* : the time of Night is the most propitious for rousing the emotion of love. As Spenser writes "Night is Love's holy day."

*l. 125. rites* : ceremonies.

*l. 126. 'Tis.....sin* : daylight alone makes sin in the sense that it reveals sin.

*l. 127. which.....report* : which the dark shades of Night will not expose.

*dim* : dusky, dark.

*l. 128.* Comus begins his incantations. He is not merely the patron of license but also a skilled magician.

*l. 129. Cotytto* : A Thracian goddess presiding over licentiousness. She is called 'dark-veiled' because her sensual rites were performed in the darkness of midnight. The festival held in her honour was called Cotyttia.

*l. 130. The secret.....burns* : referring to the mid-night orgies of Cotytto Juvenal in one of his satires describes them as being celebrated with "secret torch."

*mysterious* : since her rites are shrouded in mystery.

*l. 131. called* : invoked.

*The dragon .....darkness* : night is here regarded as a monster from whose womb issues thickest gloom. It is doubtful whether we find here, as Newton supposes, an allusion to the old belief that the chariot of night was drawn by dragons.

*l. 132. Stygian.....darkness* : the darkness of the nether regions—Hell. Styx was one of the four rivers of Hell and is a synonym of Hell. Cf. P. L. II :

"Abhorred Styx, the flood of deadly hate"

*spets* : spits, ejects.

*l. 133. And.....air* : and envelopes all nature in complete darkness. Milton first wrote "And makes a blot of nature."

*l. 134. stay* : check.

*cloudy ebon chair* : chariot black as ebony and wrapt in clouds.

*l. 135. Hecate* : a mysterious Thracian goddess, later on regarded as the moon-goddess of magic. She was usually represented as "an infernal goddess of great power, and finally was regarded as the mistress of midnight devils and spectres, the associate of souls of the murdered, and the teacher of sorcery." For these reasons she is represented as a fit companion for Cotytto and a fit patroness of Comus.

*l. 136. vowed priests* : priests who have dedicated themselves to your worship.

*utmost end* : Full completion.

*till.....done* : till 'all your appointed rites are fully performed.

*l. 137. and none left out* : and with no part of the ceremonies omitted.

l. 138. *blabbing eastern scout* : "The tale-telling spy that comes from the East, viz., Morning. Cf. Shakespeare, *Henry VI*, IV, i-1 "The gaudy, blabbing, remorseful day."

l. 139. *nice* : fastidious, squeamish about trifles. Note the touch of light contempt here. Comus has no use for the Morn which will view their festivities with too prudish eyes.

*the Indian steep* : In *Elegia Tertia* Milton describes the Sun as 'the light-bringing king' whose home is the Ganges. *Indian* has also been explained as meaning Eastern.

"The Morn is on an Indian hill, peering through a crevice in the sky as a watcher does through a loop-hole in the cabin, in order to spy upon the revellers and tell the sun."

*cabined loop-hole* : this is a description of the first glimpse of dawn. The sun seems to be struggling through some small opening. *cabined* means 'small'.

*tell-tale sun* : the sun who delights in spreading scandals. Homer says how the Sun spied on Venus and informed Vulcan of her love for Mars. "If the allusion was in Milton's mind, he glances at it in a single epithet which also serves exquisitely as a general one for the spying Sun, who shows up dark places."

*desery* : reveal ; betray.

l. 142. *our concealed solemnity* : Our secret ceremonies.

l. 143. *knit hands* : Cf. *Masque of Hymn* :

"And, since your hands are met,  
Instruct your nimble feet,  
In motions swift and meet,  
The happy ground to beat."

l. 144. *In a light fantastic round* : Cf. *L'Allegro* "Come, and trip it as you go, on the light fantastic toe." A round is a country dance in which the dancers join hands. *Fantastic* : full of fancy.

In the stage-direction in the Cambridge Ms. the dance is described as "a wild, rude, and wanton antic."

This speech of Comus is mostly in octosyllabic couplets. At the end of it he and his rout dance a measure after which he again speaks. The different strain of the speech is indicated by the return to blank verse in it.

*the measure* : "a solemn and stately dance of the nature of a Pavan or a Minuet." Later the term came to be applied to any sort of dance.

l. 145. *break off* : Stop dancing. "The metre breaks off too, as well as the dance, and runs soberly in a different pace." (Elton).

*different pace.....footing* : the tread of the feet of some one chaster than ourselves.

l. 147. *shrouds* : coverts ; places of concealment.

The stage direction at this point is : "They all scatter."

*brakes* : thickets.

l. 148. *some virgin sure* : I am certain it is some virgin.

l. 149. *for so.....art* : for I can discern it distinctly by my skill in magic.

l. 150. *wily trains* : cunning tricks. *Train* here means "allurements."

l. 151. *well stocked* : plentifully supported.

l. 152. *thus I hurl* : "Conceive that at this moment of the performance the actor who personates Comus flings into the air, or makes a gesture as if flinging into the air, some powder, which by a stage device, is kindled so as to produce a flash of blue light. In the original draft among the Cambridge Ms. the phrase is *powdered spells*, but Milton, by a judicious change, concealing the mechanism of the stage trick, substituted *dazzling*." (Masson).

l. 154. *dazzling spells* : the epithet *dazzling* conveys both ideas of brilliance and magic illusion.

*spongy air* : the air which sucks in the spells as the sponge does water.

l. 155. *of power to cheat* : capable of cheating the eye.

*blear illusion* : deception caused by the blurring of the vision. *blear* : beguiling, deceiving.

l. 156. *false presentments* : deceptive appearances ; hallucinations.

*give.....presentments* : And present a false picture to the eye.

*the place* : referring to its dreary nature.

l. 157. *my quaint habits* : my strange dress.

*breed astonishment* : cause surprise and alarm.

l. 158. *suspicious flight* : flight due to suspicion of imminent peril.

l. 160. *I, under fair.....snares* : "under the mask of friendly intentions and with the plausible language of wheedling courtesy, I insinuate myself into the unsuspecting mind and ensnare it."

*ends* : intentions.

*under.....ends* : pretending myself to be moved by friendly intentions.

l. 161. *well-placed words* : words carefully chosen to disguise my real feelings.

*glozing* : flattering and hence deceitful.

l. 162. *Baited* : made attractive.

*not unplausible* : the honesty of which cannot be doubted ; specious.

l. 163. *mind me* : insinuate myself.

*easy-hearted man* : man who has not sufficient strength of will to resist my course ; or, 'unsuspicious people.'

l. 164. *when once.....dust* : As soon as her eyes fall under the influence of this magic dust.

l. 165. *virtue* : efficacy, influence.

l. 166 *etc.* : the present reading is that of the editions of 1637 and 1645. In the edition of 1673 the reading was :

I shall appear some harmless villager,  
And hearken, if I may, her business here.  
But here she comes, I fairly step aside.

Milton himself suggested the change of 'here' to 'hear,' and the omission of the comma after 'may'.

*I shall.....villager* : the reason why Comus disguises himself is given in line 157.

*harmless* : innocent.

l. 167. *keeps up.....gear* : keeps engaged in his country affairs.

*gear* : originally meant 'preparation'. Hence, 'business' or 'affairs'.

l. 168. *fainly* : softly.

l. 171 *etc.* : with the entering of the lady the poet defines in greater detail the moral purport of the story, viz., the triumph of chastity over lust.

*this way the noise was* : the noise of the revelry seemed to come from this direction.

l. 171. *my best guide now* : since in the darkness her eyes are of no use to her.

l. 172. *ill-managed merriment* : disorderly revelry.

l. 173. *jocund* : merry, playing a merry tune.  
*gamesome* : lively.

l. 174. *unlettered hinds* : rude rustics.

Verity suggests that Milton is "thinking of a shearing feast and harvest-home, such as Herrick describes in the *Hesperides*." One is reminded of the description of the rustic festivities in *L'Allegro*,

"When the merry bells ring round,  
And jocund rebecks sound  
To many a youth and many a maid  
Dancing in the chequered shade."

*Such as.....hinds* : listening to the lively tunes of the flute and the pipe the peasants abandon themselves to unrestrained merriment.

l. 175. *teeming* : productive. *granges* : granaries.

l. 176. *wanton* : unrestrained.

*Pan* : literally means 'universal'; in Greek mythology he was the God of all nature.

Their wild dance is in honour of Pan whom they bless for his bounty. But the Puritan poet cannot help remarking that they praise the Gods in the wrong way.

l. 177. *thank the Gods amiss* : Keightly remarks : "Perhaps there is a touch of Puritan rigour in this. The Gods should be thanked in solemn acts of devotion, and not by merry-making."

*I should be loth* : the Lady is unwilling to come in contact with such rude revellers.



l. 178. *swilled insolence* : "The drunken rudeness of those carousing at this late hour."

*swilled* : a word used in a very contemptuous sense. *swill* means 'to drink like a pig.'

l. 179. *wassailers* : revellers.

l. 180. *inform* : 'find guidance for.'

*my unacquainted feet* : the feet of myself who am ignorant of the paths of this forest.

l. 181. *blind mazes* : intricate and obscure paths.

ll. 179-181. 'Whither else shall I, in my ignorance, shape my path?'

l. 182 *etc.* : The Lady narrates her experience for the information of the audience. It is such long speeches that Dr. Johnson condemns as one of the defects of *Comus*.

l. 183. *here to lodge* : here to spend the night.

l. 184. *under.....pines* : under the pines which spread kindly shelter.

*favour* : referring also to the kindly aspect of the trees.

l. 185. *as they said* : to me.

l. 187. *kind hospitable woods* : an instance of pathetic fallacy.

l. 188. *grey-hooded Even* : referring to the grey twilight of Evening. See Warton's note. 'Milton often dresses his imaginary beings in the habits of popery. But poetry is of all religions, and popery is a very poetical one.' Cf. P. R. IV, 426, where morning is described as coming 'forth with pilgrim steps in amice grey.'

l. 189. *a sad votarist* : a staid and serious devotee.

*in Palmer's weed* : attired like a pilgrim in sober-coloured or homely garments.

*Palmer* : was the name applied to a pilgrim who carried a palm branch in token of his having gone on pilgrimage to Palestine.

The comparison is between the sober twilight of Evening and the sober colour of the Palmer's garments.

l. 190. *Rose.....wain* : when the sun was setting. "If this fine image is optically realized, what we see is Evening,

succeeding Day as the figure of a venerable grey-hooded mendicant might slowly follow the wheels of some rich man's chariot." (Masson).

*wain* : wagon ; chariot. *Phoebus* : Apollo, the Sun-God.

l. 192. *is now.....thoughts* : is what occupies my mind now.

l. 193. The Lady is suggesting to herself the probable reasons for the delay of her brothers in returning.

*had engaged* : would have committed or risked. In their wanderings in the forest they might have ventured too far and so lost their way.

l. 194. *envious darkness* : the darkness of Night out of envy viewing my happy state.

l. 195. *had stole them from me* : might have stolen them from me.

*else.....stars* : the darkness must have stolen my brothers, otherwise why should night, unless it be for some felonious purpose, hide the light of the stars ?

l. 197. *thy dark lantern* : the metaphor is far-fetched and is an indication of the influence of the metaphysical poets on the early poetry of Milton. The imagery here is fantastic and borders on the grotesque. The stars are represented as being concealed by night, just as the light of a lantern is shut off by a slide. Stopford Brooke remarks : " Nothing can be worse in conception than the comparison of night to a thief, who shuts up, for the sake of his felony, the stars, whose lamps burn everlasting oil, in his dark lantern. The better it is carried out, and the finer the verse, the worse it is."

l. 198. *and filled their lamps* : filling their lamps. The stars are usually described in poetry as the lamps of heaven. Cf. Shelley's *Adonais* :

"The lamps of heaven  
Flash with a softer light."

l. 199. *due light* : appointed light. The light ordained for the night.

l. 202. *whence even.....rife* : whence the sounds of wanton revelry assailed my ears.

l. 203. *perfect.....ear* : filling my ear completely so as to drown all other sounds.

l. 204. *single darkness* : unrelieved darkness. The place to which the noise directed me is strangely vacant.

l. 205. *a thousand.....memory* : my mind is oppressed with various imaginary fears.

l. 206. Lowell remarks about this passage : " That wonderful passage in *Comus* of the airy tongues, perhaps the most imaginative in suggestion he ever wrote, was conjured out of a dry sentence in Purchas' abstract of Marco Polo. Such examples help us to understand the poet." But it is not necessary to credit any particular work with any great loan to Milton. Such fancies were very common in medieval romances and Milton might have drawn on current folklore.

l. 207. *of calling shapes etc.* : these lines describe the power of imagination or phantasy. The picture in each of these phrases is indefinite but still expressive.

Heywood in his *Hierarchy of Angels* speaks of strange shapes beckoning to lonely travellers in the dark.

*beckoning shadows dire* : Note Milton's habit when using two epithets, of using one epithet before and one after the noun ; Cf. his 'Chimeras dire' in P.L.

*dire* : terrible.

l. 208. *airy tongues* : voices that seem to proceed from nowhere, that can be associated with no human being.

*syllable* : pronounce distinctly.

l. 209. *on sands.....wildernesses* : in waste places.

ll. 210-220. It is Milton's voice that we hear in this passage. He asserts that virtue will be proof against all such wicked practices.

l. 210. *may startle well* : may well startle or alarm.

*astound* : confound.

l. 212. *a strong.....conscience* : a strong champion, viz., conscience guarding the virtuous soul by his company.

*strong-siding* : can be taken as a single word, in which case it would mean 'strongly-escorting.'

l. 213. *pure-eyed faith* : faith indicating purity of thought.  
*pure-eyed* : with a clear perception of virtue. Cf. *Lycidas*, l. 81.

“ those pure eyes  
 And perfect witness of all-judging Jove.”

*white-handed Hope* : hope of the disinterested assistance of the all-seeing God ; or, it may mean Hope arising from purity of action.

The maiden realizes that her only safeguard is her purity, and hence calls on Faith, Hope, and Chastity to assist her in her distress—each of these being characterized by an epithet denoting purity of action and thought.

l. 214. *hovering angel* : chastity like a guardian angel hovers over the maiden to protect her.

*girt with golden wings* : Cf. Psalms, LXVIII, 13 ; “ Yet shall ye be as the wings of a dove covered with silver and her feathers with yellow gold.”

l. 215. *unblemished* : that cannot be tarnished.  
*form* : aspect.

*chastity* : it is significant that for the purpose of his masque Milton substitutes *Chastity* for *Charity* in the trio of Christian virtues.

l. 216. the reading in the Cambridge Ms. was :

‘ I see ye visibly, and while I see ye  
 This dusky hollow is a Paradise  
 And Heaven gates o’er my head ; now I believe.’

*I see ye visibly* : to me you are not mere unsubstantial shapes, but living presences.

*and now believe* : and hence my faith.

l. 217. *the supreme good* : God, who is the incarnation of the Supreme Good.

*to whom.....vengeance* : since God is the Supreme Good, if evil exists, it must be for fulfilling his purposes. “ He who uses all evil powers as agents to execute his displeasure against wicked men.”

l. 219. *a glistering guardian* : angelic protector.

l. 221. *was I deceived* ? Even as she is saying that God would, if need be, send an angel to protect her, there

appears a sudden glimpse of light in the sky. "The rift in the clouds seems an omen : the moonlight is like 'a glistering guardian'." (Verity).

*sable* : dark.

*l. 223. I did not err* : it was no illusion.

Note the repetitions of the same words as in *l. 222* here, which well expresses the Faith of a clear conscience.

*l. 226. hallo* : call out.

*l. 227. make to be heard* : cause to be heard. I shall shout at the top of my voice.

*l. 228. new-enlivened spirits* : my spirits that have been newly enlivened, i.e., rendered cheerful.

*song* : songs formed a prominent feature of masques ; for the masque is only the drama pushed as far towards lyrical treatment as will be consistent with the retention of the dramatic form. This lyrical element is supplied by the songs. Of the songs in *Comus* Sir Henry Wotton remarks in his letter to Milton himself : "I should much commend the Tragical part, if the lyrical did not ravish me with a certain doric delicacy in your songs and Odes, whereunto I must plainly confess to have seen yet nothing parallel in our language : *Ipsa Mollities*."

This song is addressed to the Echo, a common personage who was appealed to in masques. The reply to the appeal duly came from behind the scenes. Ben Jonson in *Cynthia's Revels* introduces Echo even in the opening scene singing the exquisite song :

'Slow, slow, fresh fount,  
Keep time with my salt tears.'

In classical mythology Echo was a mountain nymph whom Juno punished by depriving her of the power of speech. The nymph was changed "into an echo, that is, a being with no control over its tongue, which is neither able to speak before anybody else has spoken, or to be silent when somebody else has spoken. Echo in this state fell desperately in love with Narcissus ; but as her love was not returned, she pined away in grief, so that in the end there remained of her nothing but her voice." (Class. Dict.)

This song of the Lady has been described aptly as "an address to the very genius of sound," and is very appropriate in its context. The Lady desires to attract her brothers' attention by rousing the echoes of the wood and hence she addresses Echo. There is a comparison between the Lady and Echo, in that the Lady grieves for her lost brothers just as Echo grieves for the lost youth Narcissus.

*l. 231. thy airy shell* : the hollow vault of Heaven in which Echo plays to and fro. In the Ms. there is the marginal reading 'airy call.'

*l. 232. Meander's margent green* : There is no precedent for Milton associating Echo with Meander. Meander is a river of Asia Minor noted for the windings of its course. "It is probable, that, as the Lady addresses Echo as 'the sweet queen of Parley' and the unhappy lover of the lost Narcissus, the river is here mentioned because of its associations with music and misfortune." Prof. Hales suggests the following explanation of Milton's allusion. "The real reason is that the Meander was a famous haunt of swans, and the swan was a favourite bird with the Greek and Latin writers, one to whose sweet singing they perpetually allude."

*margent* : margin.

*l. 233. the violet embroidered vale* : the valley whose ground is brodered with violets. Cf. P. L. IV. 700 :

'Under foot the violet, crocus, and hyacinth,  
With rich inlay brodered the ground.'

The violet was a flower commonly associated with love. "Prof. Hales thinks that some particular vale is here alluded to, and argues that the poet referred to the woodlands close by Athens to the north-west, through which the Cephissus flowed, and where stood the birth-place of Sophocles, who sings of his native Colonus as frequented by nightingales." The epithet 'crowned with violets' is commonly applied by Aristophanes to Athens.

*l. 234. love-lorn nightingale* : There are two versions of the story of the nightingale in classical mythology. Pandion, king of Athens, had a daughter named Philomela who was changed at her own prayer into a nightingale that she might escape the vengeance of her brother-in-law Tereus. The

epithet 'love-lorn' points to another story. Aedon killed her own son by mistake, and was changed into a nightingale whose mournful song was represented in the poetry of the ancient Greeks as a mother's lament for her child.

Milton seems to be very fond of the nightingale. Allusions to this bird abound in his poetry.

l. 235. *nightly* : every night.

*her sad song mourneth* : sings her mournful song.

l. 237. *likest thy Narcissus* : the youth who refused to respond to Echo's love in consequence of which Echo pined away until she became a voice and no more. Narcissus was punished for his obduracy by being made to fall in love with his own image reflected in a fountain.

l. 241. *sweet Queen of Parley* : Echo is so called since she seems to keep up a colloquy with the voice.

*daughter of the sphere* : "because she is musical and shares in the spherical harmony" (Elton). Echo is one form of the Voice which is praised in Solemn Music :

"Sphere-born Harmonious sisters, Voice and Verse."

l. 242. *translated* : promoted.

*so* : for which act of yours.

l. 243. *give.....harmonies* : and make the music of the spheres resound ; add to the music of heaven the charm of echo.

This song is a good example of Milton's free use of imperfect rhymes in his poetry.

l. 244. In the Cambridge Ms. there is the stage-direction : *Comus looks in and speaks*.

The opening of the speech is a little extravagant in language. But the lines embody a compliment to Lady Egerton.

*any mortal.....mould* : any mortal created out of the dust of the Earth, from whom such divine melody cannot be expected to issue.

l. 245. *ravishment* : Music which throws the hearer into a state of ecstasy.

l. 246. *sure.....breast* : Such music surely testifies to

the existence of some divine element in the Lady's mind. Verity suggests a reference in these lines to the idea "attributed to Pythagoras, that the soul is a harmony."

*l. 247. with these raptures* : with these ravishing strains.  
*makes.....residence* : by making the air vocal proves its hidden existence in the Lady's breast.

*hidden residence* : viz., in the soul.

*vocal air* : air which becomes vocal due to the Echo.

*l. 249. How sweetly.....silence* : the strains of the music were so soft that they did not disturb the silence of the atmosphere.

*l. 250. the empty-vaulted Night* : night when the hollow vault of the Heaven is not visible. The song is here represented as filling the whole atmosphere at Night.

*ll. 249-250.* "Even silence herself was content to convey her mortal enemy, sound, on her wings, so greatly was she charmed with its harmony." (Warburton).

*l. 251. fall* : close, musical end.  
*smoothing.....darkness* : the song of the Lady smooths the raven plumage of darkness.

*the raven down* : referring to the dark colour of the raven. "These lines exemplify Milton's faculty for suggesting by means of metaphor—the quality in which Coleridge among modern poets is eminent. We are to conceive of darkness as being a dusky bird whose ruffled wings cover the earth—imagery which is illustrated by *L'Allegro*, 6, where 'brooding darkness spreads her jealous wings'. And on this bird of night falls the spell of harmony, just as in the first Pythian Ode of Pindar "the eagle of Zeus was charmed to rest by music."

We are reminded of the description of the coming on of Evening in Eden in P. L. Bk. IV, where the song of the nightingale accords with the prevailing silence of the atmosphere so well that even 'silence was pleased.'

"Now came still Evening on, and Twilight gray  
 Had in her sober livery all things clad ;  
 Silence accompanied ; for beast and bird,  
 They to their grassy couch, these to their nests  
 Were slunk, all but the wakeful nightingale.  
 She all night long her amorous descant sung :  
 Silence was pleased."



l. 252. *it* : darkness. Till darkness itself became pleasing.

l. 253. *Circe with the Sirens three* : the Sirens were singing maidens who lured men to death. Their songs had the power of charming all listeners. In the *Odyssey* they are only two in number and they have nothing to do with Circe. Homer describes Circe as being waited upon by four water-goddesses "born of the wells and of the holy rivers that flow forward into the salt sea." But the fact that Circe was also a sweet singer and a powerful sorceress made Milton associate her with the Sirens.

l. 254. *flowery-kirtled Naiades* : The Naiades were freshwater nymphs in classical mythology. They were represented usually as dressed in flowers, or with their skirts adorned with flowers.

l. 255. *potent* : powerful to work spells.

*baleful* : injurious.

l. 256. *would take the prisoned soul* : would enrapture the soul prisoned in the body. *prisoned* is regarded as used proleptically. Then it would mean : "would take the soul prisoner."

l. 257. *lap it in Elysium* : fill it with the bliss of Paradise. Elysium is the Paradise of Greek mythology.

*Scylla wept* : The story of Scylla and Charybdis is narrated in the *Odyssey*. "Scylla and Charybdis were the names of two rocks between Italy and Sicily, and only a short distance from one another. In one of these rocks which was nearest to Italy, there was a cave, in which dwelt Scylla, a fearful monster, barking like a dog. In the opposite rock dwelt Charybdis, who thrice everyday swallowed down the waters of the sea, thrice threw them up again." (Class. Dict.).

But Milton does not follow the classical version of the legend here. He seems to have in mind a passage in Silius Italicus, a Latin poem where the two monsters are tamed by a Sicilian shepherd's music.

*wept* : was moved by the music to tears.

l. 258. *her barking waves* : In P. L. II, Scylla is described as surrounded by barking dogs.

"Far less abhorred than these vexed Scylla bathing in the sea.

That parts Calabria from the hoarse Trinacrian shore."

*chid.....attention* : ordered them to calm down and listen to the music.

l. 259. *fell* : cruel. *murmured* : indicating how the terrific sound of the whirlpool was stilled by the music.

l. 260. *in pleasing.....sense* : the music of the Sirens had only the effect of lulling the senses into a state of repose.

l. 261. *in sweet madness* : in that ecstatic condition.

*robbed it of itself* : 'made it unconscious.' Cf. the lines in *Il Penseroso*, 164, 165.

"As may with sweetness, through mine ear,  
Dissolve me into ecstasies,  
And bring all heaven before mine eyes."

l. 262. But the Lady's song is of more divine quality. It produces the most sacred and pleasing sensations in the mind of the hearer.

*sacred* : holy.

*home-felt* : heart-felt ; delight that is intense.

l. 263. *waking bliss* : as opposed to 'the pleasing slumber' induced by the song of the Sirens.

*such.....bliss* : The hearer is keenly conscious of the delight caused by the Lady's song. "This, says Comus is an elevated pleasure which one enjoys with all the faculties keenly awake to it and not soothed into unconsciousness."

l. 265. *hail* : at this point Comus appears from behind the scenes and addresses the Lady. Warton suggests a comparison of this passage to the speech of Ferdinand in the *Tempest* :

"O you wonder ! if you be maid or no ?"

*foreign wonder* : a wonderful creature quite alien to these regions.

l. 266. *whom.....breed* : who certainly was not brought up in this wild forest.

l. 267. *unless the goddess* : unless thou be the goddess. Cf. again Ferdinand's speech to Miranda, "the Goddess on whom these airs attend."

*l. 268. that in rural.....sylvan* : that in these rustic retreats dost dwell with the deities of the region.

*sylvan* : Sylvanus, Roman deity of fields and forests.

Lord Mouboddo comments on this passage : "If Jupiter were to speak English, he would express himself after this manner."

*by blest song* : by your blissful melody.

*l. 269. forbidding.....wood* : protecting this prosperous wood from the injurious effects of dismal and baleful fogs.

Cf. *l. 91. Arcades* :

"Such a rural queen  
All Arcadia hath not seen."

*l. 270. to touch* : to affect.

*l. 271. ill is lost* : sadly goes to waste. Prof. Masson explains it as meaning, "There is little loss in losing."

*that praise.....ears* : the praise which produces no impression on me.

*l. 272. boast of skill* : pride in my skill in music ; or, boastful desire to display my skill.

*l. 273. extreme shift* : 'utter embarrassment.'

*l. 274. regain my severed company* : rejoin the companions who were separated from me.

*l. 275. to awake.....Echo* : to invoke the kind Echo.

*l. 276. to give.....couch* : to answer my question from her bed on 'the margent green.'

*l. 277.* This is a favourite form of dialogue employed in Greek Tragedy in which question and answer occupy alternate lines. It is called *sticomythia* and is appropriate only when there is a gradual rise of excitement towards the end. Here however it is just a *tour de force* and nothing more.

*what chance* : what accident.

*l. 278. leafy labyrinth* : leafy mazes.

*dim.....labyrinth* : The darkness of night and the tangled paths of the forest.

*l. 279. near ushering guides* : guides going close in front of you.

- l. 280. The Lady now gives a different reason.  
 l. 281. *falsehood* : treachery.  
 l. 284. *purposed quick return* : intended to return quickly.  
 l. 285. *forestalling* : anticipating. The speedy advent of night prevented their joining you.  
 l. 286. *to hit* : to guess.  
 l. 287. *Imports.....need* ?—"Does losing them matter, except for their present distress ? Are they mere guides to you or more ?"

*the present need* : the immediate emergency. This may refer either to the Lady herself or to the brothers.

l. 288. *Not.....lose* : This is an indirect way of saying 'they are my brothers'. Their loss means to me the loss of my brothers.

l. 289. *were they.....bloom* ? were they in the prime of manhood or were they just youths ?

l. 290. *as smooth.....lips* : Hebe was the cupbearer of the gods and symbolized blooming youth. "The down of manhood had not appeared on the lips of the brothers."

l. 291. *what time.....came* : This was a conventional method of indicating the time of sunset in pastoral poetry. This language is very appropriate as used by Comus who appears disguised as a rustic.

*what time* : when.

*in his loose traces* : unyoked from the plough ; loosed from the plough.

l. 292. *from the furrow* : from the field.

l. 293. *swinked* : wearied with toil.

*hedger* one who makes or repairs hedges.

l. 294. *mantling vine* : the vine spreading like a mantle or cloak.

l. 295. The line well describes the vine's straggling growth.

l. 296. *plucking ripe clusters* : Cf. l. 187.

l. 297. *port* : bearing.

*was more than human* : was divine. They appeared

to be supernatural beings. Here the poet pays a graceful compliment to the two boy-actors.

l. 298. *fairy vision* : Supernatural vision.

l. 299. *gay.....element* : cheerful spirits inhabiting the air. Here is an allusion to the common belief that there were four kinds of spirits inhabiting the four elements—fire, air, water and earth. When used alone ‘Element’ means ‘the air’.

l. 300. *that.....live* : whose home is the colours of the rainbow.

l. 301. *play.....clouds* : sport in the interlaced masses of clouds.

*plighted* : The word suggests “the involved masses of banked clouds.”

l. 302. *awe strook* : stricken dumb with awe and astonishment.

l. 303. *If those you seek* : If you seek them.

*it were.....them* : it would be as pleasant a task to help you to find them as it is to go along the path to Heaven. “It would give Comus extreme happiness to accompany the Lady on her quest, with the implication that the quest of such beings (as she has just described) must be a noble one.”

Some commentators see here an allusion to the scriptural parable of the narrow and difficult path to Heaven. The passage then would mean : “To help you to find them in this dark wood would be *a task as hard as* the road to Heaven.” This interpretation contradicts the intention of Comus to flatter the Lady and encourage her into following him.

l. 305. *readiest* : easiest. Which way will take me most quickly to that place.

l. 306. *due.....point* : we have to proceed due west from this thicket.

*it rises* : the way begins.

l. 308. *In such.....starlight* : in the meagre light afforded by the stars.

l. 309. *overtask* : tax.

*would.....art* : Even the best guide would find the task of finding out a way in this dark forest too much for him.

l. 310. *without.....feet* : Unless he is helped by one who is familiar with the wood.

The Lady doubts whether this seeming rustic would be able to guide her properly.

l. 311. *alley* : avenue.

*dingle* : a glade ; a hallow between hills.

*dell* : a valley less deep than a dingle.

l. 313. *bosky bourn* : a stream whose banks are overgrown with bushes. Cf. *Nat. Ode* : 'edged with poplar pale.

*bourn* is a variation of *burn*, meaning stream.

*bosky* : from *bosk*, bush.

l. 314. *ancient neighbourhood* : old surroundings.

l. 315. *stray attendance* : companions who have strayed away.

ll. 315-316. *if.....know* : Before to-morrow morning I shall find out "whether your wandering companions be yet lodged under cover, or sheltering themselves within the bounds of this wood."

*shroud* : are sheltering.

l. 317. *Ere morrow wake* : Ere the dawn of the morrow.

*low-roosted lark* : The lark that has her roosting-place on the ground.

l. 318. *thatched pallet* : its nest which is built on the ground. The epithet 'thatched', as Masson suggests, refers to the texture of the nest or to the rushes or stubble spread over it.

Some editors find fault with Milton for his bad ornithology. Keightley remarks : "The ideas belong rather to a henhouse than to the resting-place of the lark, which has no thatch over it ; and it, being on the ground, he does not roost." Prof. Elton answers this criticism thus : "Here it is absurd to apologize, for *roosted* only means rested and *thatched*, walled."

*rouse* : awake.

*If otherwise* : If I do not succeed in taking you to the place where your brothers are.

*low* : humble. *loyal cottage* : the cottage of one of whose loyalty to you, you can be confident.

l. 321. *till further quest* : till we proceed again in our search.

l. 323. *honest-offered* : offered with sincere good-will.

l. 324 &c. such hospitality and good-nature are usually found in the cottages of rustics rather than in the courts of princes.

*lowly sheds* : humble cottages.

l. 325. *tapestry halls* : halls hung with tapestry.

*where.....named* : The word *courtesy* is derived from 'Court.' Dante writes : "Because virtues and fair manners were the custom in courts anciently, as to-day the opposite is the custom, this word was taken from Courts."

l. 326. *And yet is most pretended* : Nominally courtesy is still most common in high society, but it is really found among the humbler classes of people.

l. 327. *In.....this* : where I have less guarantee of my safety. The Lady feels that she could not be in a more dangerous place.

*that* : so that.

l. 328. *that.....it* : certainly this is not the sort of place which I would fear to change.

l. 329. She feels the necessity of divine assistance in this emergency.

*Eye me* : look on me.

*square* : adjust.

l. 330. *to my proportioned strength* : in proportion to my power of resistance.

l. 331-489. Now enter the two Brothers ; they are amazed that they do not find their sister where they left her. In the dialogue which ensues, the Elder Brother expounds the text of the poem, viz., the charm and invincibility of chastity.

l. 331. *unmuffle* : reveal yourselves. The stars were till now half hidden by the clouds.

l. 332. *wont'st* : art accustomed.

*benison* : blessing. Cf. the folk song :

Then the traveller in the dark  
Thanks you for your tiny spark,  
He would not know which way to go  
If you did not twinkle so.

*wont'st.....benison* : helpst the traveller in the dark with your light hoping to receive his blessings for the same.

l. 333. *stoop thy pale visage* : this reminds us of the picture in *Il Penseroso* of the moon "stooping through fleecy cloud." Show your faint light through an amber cloud.

*amber* : the word is "exactly descriptive of the fringe of light round the moon when shining through a cloud." Amber is a pale yellow colour.

l. 334. *disinherit chaos* : dispossess, or oust chaos.

*that reigns.....shades* : whose dominion is supreme here because of the utter darkness.

*double night* : the double effect caused by the shadows of trees and darkness.

l. 336. *influence* : used here in the astrological sense—"power flowing from the stars and exercised by them upon human fates."

*if your.....up* : if your influence has lost its potency.

l. 337. *with black usurping mists* : dark mists which have usurped your power and hold sway over the night.

*some gentle taper* : it is a vocative here ; the taper of a humble cottage is addressed. "If your influence (the moon's) be quite eclipsed, then do thou, Oh gentle taper, from some quarter, visit us."

l. 338. *though.....hole* : though your light be as faint as that of a rush candle.

*rush-candle* : a light obtained from the pith of a rush dipped in oil.

*wicker* : made of plaited twigs or osiers.

*the wicker.....habitation* : the description of a poor man's cottage.

l. 340. *long levelled rule* : straight ray of light. *rule* :



ray. "The alliteration is clearly meant to suggest the line of light."

*l. 340. star of Arcady* : a star belonging to the constellation of the Great Bear. The classical legend is that the Arcadian nymph Calisto was turned into a bear by Juno, and then transformed by her paramour Jove into the star the Great Bear. Greek sailors usually steered by this star.

*l. 342. Tyrian Cynosure* : Cynosure literally means "the star to which sailors looked." Here the reference is to the Lesser Bear into which Arcas, son of Calisto, was changed by Zeus his father. He was called the 'Tyrian Cynosure' because the Tyrian or Phoenician sailors steered their course by him. Hence the Lesser Bear was also called the Phoenician star.

*ll. 341-342.* The language here is rather fanciful. The speaker prays that a beam of light from some lowly cottage may come and give him pilotage in the same manner as constellations direct the course of mariners.

*l. 343. barred* : barred from.

*might we but hear* : may Providence grant that we may hear.

*hear the folded flocks* : hear the bleating of sheep in their folds—an evidence of the nearness of human habitation.

*l. 345. wattled cotes* : sheepfolds enclosed by hurdles. *wattle* means 'hurdle.'

*l. 346. pastoral reed* : the oaten pipe, conventional in pastoral poetry.

*stops* : the holes in the musical instrument over which the player's fingers are placed.

*l. 347. whistle.....lodge* : the shepherd calling his dogs by whistling.

*lodge* : a small house in the forest where the keeper of the wood dwells.

*village cock.....dames* : the crowing of the cock is here spoken of as marking the passage of time in the night to the hens.

*night-watches* : the divisions of the night ; the hours of the night.

*feathery dames* : such phraseology was largely responsible for the pseudo-poetic diction of Augustan poetry.

*l. 349. 'twould.....yet* : if we could hear any of these sounds it would afford us some comfort by making us feel that we are near the haunts of humanity.

*some little cheering* : some small happiness.

*l. 350. innumerable* : innumerable. In this dark forest with its innumerable trees.

*hapless* : unfortunate.

*l. 351. wither betake.....dew* : where could she go to escape the chill dew of the night ?

*whither betake her* : what shelter has she found.

*l. 352. burs* : prickly seeds of certain plants.

*l. 353. bolster* : pillow. Most likely she is lying on the cold bank of some river.

*l. 354. leans* : reclines : *head* is the subject.

*l. 355. fraught with sad fears* : burdened with dark fears.

*l. 356. what if in wild amazement* : what can be done if she be in wild amazement.

*amazement* : bewilderment.

*l. 357. while we speak* : even while we are wasting time in empty talk.

*l. 358. of savage hunger* : of famished wild beasts.

*of savage heat* : of the appetite of lustful men.

*l. 358. "The hunger of savage beasts, or the lust of men as savage as they."*

The Second Brother seems to be more practical than the Elder one. Warton remarks : "The dialogue between the two brothers is an amicable contest between fact and philosophy. The younger draws his arguments from common apprehension, and the obvious appearance of things ; the elder proceeds on a profounder knowledge, and argues from abstracted principles. Here the difference of their ages is properly made subservient to a contrast of character."

*l. 359. over-exquisite* : over-inquisitive.

*Be not over-exquisite* : 'Do not consider too curiously.'

*l. 360. cast* : forecast.

*l. 360. cast.....evils* : prejudice the nature of calamities which, you cannot assert, will happen.

*l. 361. grant they be so* : Even granting that the evils turn out as you anticipated, or, "Grant that they are real evils, not 'false alarms'."

*l. 362. forestall his date of grief* : anticipate his period of sorrow.

*l. 363. and run.....avoid* : and extend as it were a half-way hand of welcome to the ills which he should most avoid.

*l. 364. false alarms of fear* : vague imaginary fears which are belied by actual facts.

*l. 365. How.....delusion* : what an amount of needless pang do such fancies cause you !

The speaker argues that either way such vague and alarming conjectures as his brother makes are needless. Like Hamlet his advice is that we should "rather bear those ills we have."

*l. 366. so to seek* : so much at a loss. Cf. P. L. VIII, 197. "Unpractised, unprepared, and still to seek." Our sister is not so wanting in ability to take care of herself.

*l. 367. unprincipled in virtue's book* : unversed in the elements of virtue. In the Tractate of Education Milton speaks of 'souls so unprincipled in virtue.'

*l. 368. sweet.....ever* : the delightful peace which a virtuous soul always enjoys.

*bosoms* : holds within itself.

*l. 369. single* : mere.

*single want.....noise* : The darkness and silence of the region.

*l. 370. not being in danger* : an absolute construction—she not being in danger. The speaker means to say : If she is in no danger the mere want of light and sound need not alarm her.

*l. 371. stir.....thoughts* : cause disquiet to her calm and steadfast mind.

l. 372. *mis-becoming plight* : an unseemly condition.

l. 372. *virtue.....light* : Virtue does not need external assistance to overcome Evil. Her own light is sufficient to dispel darkness. Cf. Spenser, *Faerie Queene* : 'Virtue gives herself light through darkness for to wade.'

l. 375. *flat sea* : referring to the flat surface of the sea.

l. 376. *seeks to* : repairs to. The wise man loves a life of retirement.

How well do these words portray Milton's own ideal of a life properly conducted ! Thus to win Wisdom he "sought to " the solitude of Horton.' He gravely put aside from him those things which make life pleasant and precious. "He put away tears and laughter, the common sweetness of earth, the power to move the hearts and bring loveliness into the lives of men."

l. 377. *her best nurse, contemplation* : Solitude is, as Sidney remarks in his *Arcadia*, "the nurse of these contemplations." In *Il Penseroso* also Milton praises "The Cherub Contemplation" as the chiefest of the companions of Melancholy.

l. 378. *she plumes her feathers* : She smooths her feathers, picking out the damaged ones. In solitude and contemplation Wisdom develops her powers just as the bird prunes her plumage for further flight.

l. 379. *in the various bustle of resort* : in the din and bustle of towns and cities.  
*various* : varied.

l. 380. *all to-ruffled* : In the Ms. this is written as 'all to-ruffled'. This may be interpreted in three ways : 1. all to-ruffled ; 2. all-to ruffled ; 3. all too ruffled. The first seems to be the most acceptable version, since the second gives a less pleasing rhythm and the third is not warranted by Milton's text. The prefix *to* added to verbs gave the sense 'to pieces'. Cf. Judges, IX-53. "and all to-brake his skill." 'Thoroughly disturbed.'

*impaired* : injured, spoilt.

ll. 375-380. The lines mean : "Wisdom in solitude, and with the help of contemplation gets facilities for develop-

ing her powers, which she would not get, or which she cannot properly use in the hum and bustle of crowded life."

*l. 381. He.....breast* : He who has the clear light of a pure conscience ; noble and open souls.

*l. 382. in the centre* : in the interior of earth—the darkest of places. Cf. Jonson, *Volpone*, I. i-8.

"Shew'st like a flame by night, or like the day  
Struck out of Choas, when all darkness fled  
Unto the centre."

*and enjoy bright day* : He may be in the darkest of places ; the clear light of his conscience will guide his path properly.

*l. 383. a dark soul* : a soul full of dark thoughts ; a soul that has shut out the white light of virtue.

*l. 384. benighted.....sun* : Really goes about in complete darkness though he might be walking in the midday sun.

The idea in these lines resembles the sentiment of the speech of Satan in P. L. I :

"The mind is its own place, and in itself  
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven."

*l. 385. Himself is his own dungeon* : The foul conscience makes the man a dungeon to himself. So does Satan say in P. L. IV, when within sight of Paradise,

"Myself am Hell."

*l. 386. The younger brother* is not comforted by the words of the Elder one. What the latter has said might be applicable to the case of ascetics and pilgrims, but not certainly to the case of their sister.

*l. 387. Musing.....cell* : It is true that ascetics desiring to lead a life of calm contemplation retire to desert cells.

*most affects* : has the greatest liking for.

*l. 388. pensive secrecy* : seclusion most suited to Meditation.

*l. 389. Cf. Gray's line in the Elegy* : "Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife."

*sits as safe as in a senate-house* : This refers to the fact that the senate-house was in ancient Rome considered inviolable. An ascetic in his desert cell might be as safe as a senator in the senate-house.

l. 390. *who.....dish* : The hermit offers no temptations to the robber, with his meagre garment, his beads, and his few books.

l. 392. *do.....violence* : do him personal injury.

Verity remarks : " If Milton had written *Comus* after his return from Italy, we might have thought that in these lines he was simply re-painting in words some picture seen in an Italian palace."

ll. 393-395. Milton's poetry combines the perfection of the classical with the perfection of the romantic manner. This passage is an instance of the perfect fusion of the two elements. It gives in brief scope the concentrated essence of the passage suppressed in the opening part of the masque. The passage means : Beauty provokes thieves sooner than gold. Rather than leave it alone, one must guard it with great vigilance if it is to escape the attacks of lustful men. It should be guarded in the same way as the tree with the golden apples in the garden of Hesperides was watched over by the dragon with sleepless eye.

*the fair Hesperian tree* : an allusion to the golden apples which Gea the Earth gave to Juno on her marriage with Zeus. These apples grew on a fair tree on an island in the west, and were guarded by the nymphs called the Hesperides with the aid of a sleepless dragon, called Ladon. One of the labours of Hercules was to slay the dragon and obtain the golden apples.

Milton seems to be very fond of this story, as is evident from the numerous allusions to it in his poetry. In *Comus* itself he refers to it no less than three times. Cf. l. 982 "all amidst the gardens fair of Hesperus and his daughters three that sing about the golden tree." Later in *Paradise Lost*, wherever the poet describes Eden he cannot help making mention of the garden of Hesperides. Cf. Bk. IV.

" Groves whose rich trees wept odorous gums and balm,  
Others whose fruit burnisht with golden rind,  
Hung amiable, Hesperian fables true,  
If true, here only."

*laden with blooming gold* : loaded with golden fruit.

*had need* : would need.

l. 395. *dragon watch* : the care of dragons.

*enchanted eye* : with eyes which will not yield to enchantment ; eye not to be enchanted.

ll. 394-395 : "would need dragons to watch over her with eyes that cannot be enchanted, in order to save "

l. 396. *save her .....fruit* : protect her virginity.

l. 397. *from..... incontinence* : from the presumptuous attacks of bold and lustful men.

l. 398. The speaker says : "The fair woman will be as safe in such circumstances as the unsunned heaps of miser's treasure are by an outlaw's den."

*unsunned* : hidden.

*unsunned.....treasure* : the secret hoard of the miser.

l. 401. *danger will wink on opportunity* : Danger blinds itself to an opportunity like this. The personification of *danger* is rather hard to understand. "Masson explains danger as a kind of sentinel and as conniving at something illicit done by an accomplice. But here danger is clearly the assailant, not the warder, and *wink at* must mean 'refuse to see, forgo' ". (Elton)

l. 402. *single* : lonely.

*uninjured* : unmolested.

*surrounding* : encompassing.

It is too much to hope that in such adverse conditions (viz. her lovely condition and the dreary nature of this place) the lady will be in no danger of being molested.

l. 404. *I reckon me not* : I do not care.

l. 405. *I fear.....both* : rather do I dread the evil results that follow close on night and loneliness.

*dog* : follow closely.

l. 406. *ill-greeting touch* : the touch of one evilly inclined.

l. 407. *unowned sister* : thinking that our sister is unowned. Or, it may mean just 'lonely', unprotected.

l. 408. How utterly lacking in a sense of humour is the Elder Brother. He is very much like Milton in this respect—a solemn and pedantic prig. Garnet remarks,

“ His dialogues with his junior reveal the same solemn insensibility to the humorous which characterizes the kindred genius of Wordsworth, and would have provoked the kindly smile of Shakespeare.”

*infer* : argue ; reason. The word is not now used in this sense.

*l. 409. without all doubt* : beyond all doubt ; outside the pale of doubt.

*controversy* : of whose safety there can be no two opinions.

*l. 410. where an.....event* : “ where hope and fear are equally balanced judges, as it were, to decide on the result ” ; where there is as much cause for hope as for fear, I would rather incline to hope.

*l. 411. arbitrate the event* : Judge of the result.

*l. 413. squint suspicion* : looking sideways usually indicates suspicion.

It is “ the bodily emblem of mental obliquity.”

*l. 415. a hidden strength* : the strength of chastity.

*l. 419. if Heaven gave it* : even though heaven gave it.

*her own* : our sister's distinctive possession.

“ The passage which begins here and ends at line 475, is a concentrated expression of the moral of the whole *Masque*, and an exposition also of a cardinal idea of Milton's philosophy.” (Masson).

*l. 421. clad in complete steel* : completely armed.

*l. 422. a quivered.....keen* : The Roman Diana, goddess of Chastity was represented as armed with bow and quiver. There is here “ a blended reminiscence of the classical Diana, of Spenser's Belphebe, (at her back a bow and quiver gay) ” and perhaps of Fletcher's Parthenia in *The Purple Island*.

*l. 423. trace* : traverse.

*unharboured heaths* : heaths offering no shelter.

*l. 424. Infamous* : of ill repute.

*l. 425. The sacred rays of chastity* : The divine power of chastity.



*l. 426. bandite* : outlaw.

*mountaineer* : here used in a bad sense, a wild savage.

*l. 428. there where* : The usage is for emphasis. Even in the places where.

*very desolation* : real or utter desolation.

*l. 429. shagged with horrid shades* : presenting a wild appearance with its bristling shades. Cf. note on *l. 38*. "Poets in whom the classical influence is strong use *horrid* of wood because the latin *horridus* (= shaggy) is a favourite epithet of woodland scenery."

*l. 430. unblenched* : unshrinking ; unflinching. This is how Shakespeare describes the fair vestal virgin in *Midsummer Night's Dream* as passing on "in maiden meditation, fancy-free."

*l. 431. Be it not done* : Provided it be not done, viz., that out of pride or presumption the person does not court temptation and danger.

*l. 432. some say* : Prof. Elton quotes a similar passage from Fletcher's.

*faithful shepherdess* : where the heroine cries out that if she only remains pure,

"No goblin, wood-god, faery, elf or friend,  
Satyr, or other power that haunts the groves  
Shall hurt my body, or by vain illusion  
Draw me to wander after idle fires ;  
Or voices calling me at dead of night  
To make me follow."

The idea is the same in Milton, but is expressed in richer and more poetic language.

*l. 433. in fog or fire* : This refers to the various orders of demons in whose existence people believed in the Middle Ages. Cf. *Il Penseroso*, *l. 93*. "Those demons that are found. In fire, air, flood, or underground"—they are called Salamander, Sylph, Nymph and Gnome respectively.

*fire* : "a false flame (*ignis fatuus*) such as was supposed to attend malicious spirits like Will-o'-the-wisp and Jack-o-the-hawthorn, who loved to 'mislead the amazed night-wanderer from his way.'"

*lake or moorish fen* : Explained by Ben Jonson in a note which he adds to a certain passage as "places, in their own nature dire and dismal, are reckoned up as the fittest from whence such persons should come."

l. 434. *Blue meagre hag* : The epithet 'blue' probably means 'livid with famine'; 'Hag' means 'prophet or witch.'

*stubborn* : hard to banish.

*unlaid ghost* : spirit waiting to be pacified. "It was a superstitious belief that ghosts left the world of spirits and wandered on the earth between curfew and cockcrow." This belief is often alluded to in Shakespeare. Cf. *King Lear*, III, 4, 120 : "The foul friend Flibbertigibbet ; he begins at curfew and walks till the first cock."

l. 435. *curfew time* : the bell that was rung at eight or nine o'clock in the evening.

l. 436. *goblin* : demon.

*swart faery of the mine* : Prof. Elton gives the following meaning : 'gnome black like a miner'. The better meaning seems to be gnomes which dwell in mines. Warton quotes from an old writer : "Pioneers or diggers for metal do affirm that in many mines there appear strange shapes and spirits who are appalled like unto the labourers in the pit." *swart* : swarthy ; black.

l. 437. *hath.....virginity* : can harm a true virgin.

l. 438. *or shall I call* : If my words do not convince you I shall support what I say by the authority of the ancients.

*shall I.....chastity* ? "Shall I appeal to the works of Greek philosophers for testimony to the power of purity ?"

The speaker now turns for arguments to the old Greek legends and medieval mythology.

l. 440. *to testify* : To bear testimony for.

*the arms of chastity* : the power of virginity.

l. 441. *Dian* : Diana or Artemis was the huntress among the immortals. She was the patron—goddess of virgins. That is why she is here spoken of as setting at nought the bolts of Cupid. She was also represented as the protectress

of the flocks and herds from beasts of prey and as sending plagues and sudden deaths among men and animals.

*l. 442. silver-shafted queen* : applicable to Diana in her two-fold nature as huntress and goddess of the moon ; as huntress she had shafts, and as the Moon-goddess she bore shafts or rays of light.

*l. 443. brinded* : brindled or streaked.

*l. 444. pard* : leopard.

*l. 445. the frivolous bolt of Cupid* : Probably the epithet 'frivolous' applies to Cupid in his character as the God of sensual love. Or, it may mean 'Love which to a Puritan like Milton seems to be a frivolous pastime.'

*l. 446. queen o'the woods* : Cf. Ben Jonson's song. "Queen and huntress, chaste and fair."

*l. 447. snaky-headed Gorgon shield* : The shield of Athene or Minerva on which was placed the petrifying head of Medusa. Medusa was one of the three Gorgons, frightful monsters, whose heads were covered with hissing serpents. Any one who looked at Medusa was turned into stone, but Perseus, by the aid of enchantment, slew her.

*l. 448. wise Minerva* : Pallas Athene, in Greek mythology, was the goddess of wisdom as also of war.

*l. 449. freezed* : froze.

*to congealed stone* : forge into a stone so that it became congealed.

*l. 450. But* : except. The Gorgon shield is to be interpreted symbolically as representing 'rigid looks of chaste austerity.'

*rigid.....austerity* : stern countenance indicating unswerving virginity.

*l. 451. dashed* : confounded. Even brutal natures were overcome by the mere look of her eyes wherein shone sublime chastity. *blank* : helplessly amazed.

Milton gives the old Greek legends an ideal turn. The poet's aim is to interpret the Greek ideas in a way at once sympathetic and modern. Consequently, with rare insight he catches the very spirit of the Greek ideas and

represents them in his tales. Verity remarks : " Milton points the moral, and we may here note how he has taken two old-world, seemingly out-worn legends and has invested them with an entirely new significance. It is Plato's method. Plato will often select some, popular expression and apply it in a novel, metaphysical sense ; or some popular belief, and read into it a fresh meaning, thereby raising superstition to the higher plane of philosophy."

*l. 454. sincerely so : sincerely chaste.*

*l. 455. a thousand.....her :* innumerable ministering angels attend on her.

*liveried :* clad in all their celestial array.

Milton oftentimes refers to the idea of the Guardian Angel watching over mortals.

*ll. 456-458.* The idea in these lines is Platonic. Plato says in his *Phaedo* : ' Those who are remarkable for having lived holy lives are released from this earthly prison, and go to their pure home which is above, and dwell in the purer earth '. Again, in the *Phaedrus* he writes : " and there they see in the interior of heaven many blessed sights ; and there are ways, to and fro along which the happy Gods are passing, each one fulfilling his own work ; and anyone may follow who pleases, for jealousy has no place in the heavenly quiet."

*l. 456. driving.....guilt :* Driving off from her all evil things.

*ll. 457-458. in clear.....hear :* inform her in clear and heavenly dreams of things which only the pure-souled can hear.

*gross :* unpurged.

*l. 459. oft converse :* frequent communion.

*l. 460. Begin.....shape :* begin to impart its characteristic brilliance to the outward countenance also.

*l. 461. unpolluted.....mind :* i.e., is the body—a very common metaphor.

*l. 462. turns.....essence :* until gradually the body by this long course of self-discipline becomes soul. Here too the thought is Platonic. Masson explains the passage thus : " Here we have the germ of the peculiar speculation after-

wards developed more at length in Raphael's speech to Adam in P. L. v. 404-503 ". Raphael says that there is a hierarchy of beings rising from matter and reaching to God. Man's position is between the two, with the chance of 'participating with angels' by his own virtue, so that his body 'may at last turn all to spirit.'

" One first matter all,  
 Endued with various forms, various degrees  
 Of substance, and in things that live, of life ;  
 But more refined, more spirituous and pure,  
 As nearer to him placed, or nearer tending  
 Each in their several active spheres assigned,  
 Till body up to spirit work, in bounds  
 Proportioned to each kind.....  
 Time may come when Men  
 With Angels may participate, and find  
 No inconvenient diet, nor too light fare ;  
 And from these corporal nutriments, perhaps,  
*Your bodies may at last turn all to spirit,*  
 Improved by tract of time, and wing'd ascend  
 Ethereal."

*the soul's essence* : as if the body becomes like the soul, partaking of its immortality.

*But when lust etc.* : this doctrine is expounded by Plato in his *Phaedo*, and was a common property of folk-lore.

SOCRATES : " That soul, I say, herself invisible, departs to the invisible world—to the divine and immortal and rational : thither arriving, she is secure of bliss, and is released from the error and folly of men, their fears and wild passion and all other human ills, and for ever dwells as they say of the initiated, in company with the Gods.....

But the soul which has been polluted, and is impure at the time of the departure, and is the companion and servant of the body always, and is in love with and fascinated by the body and by the desire and pleasures of the body, until she is led to believe that the truth only exists in a bodily form, which a man may touch and see and taste, and use for the purposes of his lusts,—the soul, I mean, accustomed to hate and fear and avoid the intellectual principle, which to the bodily eye is dark and invisible and can be attained only by philosophy ; do you suppose that such a soul will depart pure and unalloyed ?

She is held fast by the corporeal, which the continual association and constant care of the body have wrought into her nature. And this corporeal element is heavy and weighty and earthy, and is that element by which such a soul is depressed and dragged down again into the visible world, because she is afraid of the invisible and of the world below—prowling about tombs and sepulchres, in the neighbourhood of which, as they tell us, are seen certain ghostly apparitions of souls which have not departed pure, but are cloyed with sight and one therefore visible." This is one of the very current superstitions of folk-lore.

*l. 464. loose : wanton.*

*l. 465. lavish act of sin : unrestrained indulgence in sinful enjoyments.*

*l. 466. lets in.....parts : permits the soul to be sullied.*

*l. 467. clotted by contagion : due to the contagious influence of the sensual appetite of the body all pure impulses are choked within the soul.*

*l. 468. imbodies and imbrates : "grows fleshly and brutish." This probably refers to the belief that the souls of wicked people "find their prisons in the same natures which they have had in their former lives."*

*l. 469. the divine property : The essential divine quality which she possessed in the beginning.*

*ll. 470-475. This, says the Elder Brother, will explain why the spirits of wicked people cling to their earthly tabernacles even after they have undergone complete decay.*

*l. 471. charnel vaults : burial vaults.*

*l. 473. As loth.....loved : As if it were reluctant to leave the body which it had loved so much.*

*l. 474. and linked.....sensually : and with which it had associated in base sensual pleasures.*

*l. 475. To a.....state : until the soul itself got dragged down to the level of the base and degraded body.*

*ll. 476-486 : "These verses are a lyrical outburst which comes as a relief to the mind after a long strain of argument. They express something of the admiration of the younger*

Brother for the superior culture of an Elder, but their chief purpose is to mark a close and a transition to a new stage in the development of the story. In the Greek Tragedy (of which *Samson Agonistes* is a perfect example) there are long lyrical speeches of the chorus and these mark the modern divisions into acts, and there are brief exclamations which may be said to divide the acts into scenes. In *Comus* most of the divisions are marked by a complete change of scene or characters or circumstance but in the present case the external change consists simply in the entrance of an additional character Thyrsis and accordingly these verses are given to mark the entire change in the movement of the thought."

l. 476. *divine philosophy* : philosophy such as is found in "the divine volume of Plato."

l. 477. *crabbed* : sour ; bitter.

l. 478. *Apollo's lute* : Apollo was the god of song and music. Cf. Milton's Tractate on Education : "I will point out to you the right path of a noble and virtuous education ; laborious indeed at the first ascent, but else so smooth, so green, so full of goodly prospect, that the harp of Orpheus was not more charming."

l. 479. *nectared* : sweet as nectar.

*perpetual feast* : because it is a feast to the mind.

l. 480. *crude* : 'undigested'.

*where.....reigns* : which will never cloy your appetite.

l. 482. *break the silent air* : disturb the silence of the night.

l. 483. *night foundered* : lost at night. Masson explains : 'swallowed up in the night'. The implied comparison is to the ship in the sea when she founders or goes to the bottom.

l. 487. *Best draw* : We had better draw our swords.

l. 489. *defence is a good cause* : If he comes with ill intentions, we can defend ourselves, fully convinced that we are engaged in a good cause.

*And Heaven be for us* : And may Heaven be on our side.

l. 490. The Attendant Spirit halloes just before entering.  
*that hallo I should know* : That cry of response seems to be very familiar to me.

l. 491. *you fall.....else* : Otherwise you will fall on these swords of ours.

l. 494. *Thyrsis* : a name common in pastoral poetry. This part was played by the musician Lawes who now receives further praise for his musical genius.

This speech of the Elder Brother is the only one in ten-syllabled couplets. Dr. Johnson remarks : "It is remarkable that at this interview the Brother is taken with a short fit of rhyming." But the poet may have introduced this rhymed passage "to prolong the feeling of Pastoralism by calling up the cadence of known English pastoral poems" such as Ben Jonson's *Sad Shepherd* and Fletcher's *Faithful Shepherdess*.

*artful strains* : songs rendered with great art.

l. 495. *huddling brook* : brook whose wavelets hurry along and tumble over each other eager to listen to the melody.

*madrigal* : a shepherd's song sung to various kinds of musical accompaniment.

l. 496. *sweetened.....dale* : Implying that the music of Thyrsis gave greater fragrance to fragrant flowers like the musk-rose.

l. 497. *swain* : a word commonly used in pastoral poetry—peasant.

l. 499. *pent flock forsook* : strayed away from his companions penned in the fold.

l. 501. *next* : nearest or dearest. It does not refer to the Second Brother as is suggested by some commentators.

l. 502. *toy* : trifle.

*I came.....toy* : My purpose in coming here is not so trifling.

l. 503. *the stealth of* : things robbed by.

*not all.....errand* : All the sheep that inhabit these valleys put together cannot merit a moment's thought compared to this errand of mine and the anxiety which it involved.

l. 508. *how chance she is etc.* : How comes it that &c.

l. 509. *sadly* : seriously.



*without blame or our neglect* : Owing to no fault of ours.

l. 511. *my fears are true* : what I dreaded has happened.

l. 512. *shew* : explain.

l. 513. *'Tis not vain or fabulous* : It is not a fable without any significance.

l. 515. *sage poets* : Probably the reference is to Homer and Virgil in particular, both of whom mention the chimera. *taught by* : inspired by.

l. 516. *storied* : narrated.

*in high immortal verse* : in sublime poetic language.

l. 517. *chimeras* : A monster which belched forth fire, compounded of lion, dragon, and goat. Bellorophon slew it in Licia. Virgil places this monster at the gate of Hell. *dire-dreadful*.

*enchanted isles* : e.g., the isle of Calypso in the *Odyssey* or that of Circe. Verity supposes that, here is certainly a reference to the Wand'ring Islands of the *Faerie Queene*.

l. 518. *rifted rocks* : riven rocks ; rocks with gaping chasms.

*whose entrance leads to Hell* : A reminiscence of the classical story of Orpheus who entered the lower world through the rocky jaws of Taenarus, while wandering in search of Eurydice.

l. 519. *but unbelief is blind* : But sceptical people will refuse to believe.

l. 520. *navel* : recess.

l. 521. *immured* : enclosed.

l. 523. *witcheries* : enchantments.

l. 525. *with many murmurs mixed* : with the incantations of evil powers murmured over the intended victim.

*pleasing poison* : what is really poisonous but seems agreeable to the taste.

l. 526. *The visage.....drinks* : transforms countenance of any one who tastes thereof.

ll. 528-530. *And the.....face* : And instead changes into a most ugly and brutish form, "destroying the emblem of reason which is stamped on the human countenance."

*l. 530. reason's.....face* : The stamp of reason imprinted on the human countenance.

*Reason* : "For Milton, the chief faculty of the soul ; the embodiment of those higher qualities of intellect which separate men from the brute creation."

*charactered* : engraved as on a coin.

*l. 531. crofts that brow* : Enclosed fields that overhang.

*l. 532. bottom glade* : glade in the valley.

*l. 533. monstrous rout* : herd of monsters.

*l. 534. howl like stabled wolves* : howl like wolves in their dens. Prof. Elton suggests : wolves which have strayed into the sheepfolds.

*l. 535. abhorred* : loathsome ; detestable.

*l. 536. obscured.....bowers* : their haunts steeped in complete darkness.

*l. 537. yet* : "Though they themselves are 'monstrous' and therefore repulsive, and their 'rites' horrible, *yet* they have means to attract people."

*guileful spells* : cunning charms.

*l. 538. inveigle* : ensnare.

*l. 539. unweeting* : unwillingly ; ignorant of the danger.

*l. 540. By then* : By the time when.

*l. 542. knot grass* : a grass with knotted stem.

*dew-besprent* : besprinkled with dew.

*l. 544. with ivy canopied* : Over which the ivy had spread like a canopy.

*interwove with flaunting honeysuckle* : the ivy was thickly interlaced with the showy honeysuckle.

*Flaunting* : 'waving its blossoms loosely like a flag.'

*l. 546. wrapt.....melancholy* : Immersed in sweet thoughts. The 'melancholy' of the line is the serious, meditative mood described in *Il Penseroso*.

*l. 547. meditate* : practise.

*meditate my rural minstrelsy* : play on my oaten reed.

*l. 548. had* : should have. Till my ranging fancies were fully satisfied.

*Ere a close* : 'before he had finished his song.' (Masson).

l. 549. *wonted roar* : i.e., of the monstrous rout of Comus. *was up* : had begun.

l. 550. *Barbarous dissonance* : most frightful noise.

l. 551. *listened them* : The omission of 'to' after verbs of hearing common in the time of Milton.

l. 552. *unusual stop* : sudden cessation of the noise. Cf. l. 145.

l. 553. *gave respite.....sleep* : The barbarous noise produced by Comus' rout is here represented as having kept the steeds of Night awake and in a state of drowsy agitation. The sudden silence gave them a respite from their uneasiness.

*drowsy-flighted* : The first three editions have the reading *drowsy frighted* ; The Cambridge Ms. has *drowsy flighted* : The latter reading is certainly the most poetical and means : flying drowsily. Verity remarks : "*Drowsy-flighted* gives a more picturesque conception ; it is in form an essentially *Miltonic* compound—Cf. 'flowery kirtled' (254), 'rushy-fringed' (890) ;" and it harmonizes with the passage in 2 *Henry VI*, IV. i. 3-6, which Milton must have had in his mind's eye :

" And now loud-howling wolves arouse the jades  
That drag the tragic melancholy might ;  
Who with their *drowsy, slow and flagging wings*  
Clip dead men's graves."

We have, surely, in the third line of this quotation the germ of *drowsy-flighted*, and it appears most improbable that Milton should have changed the time so manifestly for the worse. Further, *drowsy-flighted* is an awkward combination of opposite ideas. I suppose then that *frighted* was simply an error in the 1637 edition which escaped Milton's notice, and not being corrected by him, was of course reproduced by the printer in the later editions."

l. 554. *litter* : chariot.

*close-curtained sleep* : sleep is figured here as being drawn by drowsy steeds in a chariot whose curtains are closely drawn.

l. 555. *solemn breathing* : imparting a solemnity to the atmosphere itself. This of course refers to the Lady's song.

l. 556. *rose.....perfumes* : The comparison between sound and scent is very common in poetry, like the exhalation of divine odours.

l. 557. *stole upon the air* : imperceptibly pervaded the whole atmosphere.

l. 558. *ere she was aware* : unawares.

l. 559. *deny her nature* : renounce her proper characteristic.

*be never more* : cease to exist.

l. 560. *still to be so displaced* : If but she were always banished by such melody.

ll. 555-560. "The Lady's song rose into the air so sweetly and imperceptibly that silence was taken unawares and so charmed that she would gladly have renounced her nature and existence forever if her place could always be filled by such music."

*I was all ear* : I was all attentive.

l. 561. *took in strains* : listened to the music ; let the music sink into my soul.

*that.....death* : some commentators suppose that Milton had in mind when he wrote this line a picture in Quarles' Emblems of 'an infant represented within the ribs of a skeleton', beneath which was written the scriptural verse : 'who shall deliver me from the body of this death ?' It is not necessary to attach such significance to a conventional description. It means only : Potent enough to breathe life even into the dead.

l. 564. *Too well* : Too clearly.

l. 565. *harrowed* : vexed and distracted.

l. 567. *How sweet.....snare* : you sing so sweetly that it seems you are oblivious of the nearness of your peril.

l. 568. *lawns* : glades.

l. 569. *turnings.....day* : windings in the road which I know well, since I have often trod them by day.

l. 570. *hid in sly 'disguise* : disguised cunningly as a villager.

l. 571. *by certain signs* : By the virtue of Haemony, the magic herb referred to in l. 644.

l. 572. *ere.....prevent* : Though I hurried quickly to intercept her.

l. 573. *wished prey* : wished for victim.

l. 575. *Such two* : Two men of such and such description. Evidently he was present at the interview between Comus and Lady, though invisible to either of them.

l. 581. *triple knot* : triple alliance between Hell, Night, and Shades. The powers of Hell have allied themselves with the darkness and loneliness of night, since night is the most propitious time for their influence.

l. 584. Warton remarks : " This confidence of the Elder Brother in favour of the final efficacy of virtue, holds forth a very high strain of philosophy, delivered in as high strains of eloquence and poetry." The passage is instinct with all Milton's Puritan fervour.

l. 585. *Lean on it safely* : you may safely rely on the truth of my arguments.

*period* : sentence.

l. 586. *for me* : so far as I am concerned.

l. 588. *which.....chance* : which men miscall Chance. What people attribute to Chance, the speaker would say, is in reality the work of Providence.

*this I hold firm* : I hold firmly to this belief.

l. 589. *virtue.....hurt* : Vice may attempt to overcome Virtue, but cannot do any permanent harm to her.

l. 590. *enthralled* : enslaved ; completely overcome.

l. 591. *meant most harm* : intended should work the greatest harm.

*even that.....harm* : ' Even that which the Lord of Evil meant should work most harm '.

l. 592. *happy trial* : blessed trial of strength between virtue and vice.

*prove most glory* : redound to the glory of virtue, 'happy trial', is explained by Verity as meaning : "The trial which proves virtue happy." The meaning is rather strained.

This passage gives expression to Milton's considered views on the supreme problem of life which later he expounded in *Paradise Lost*, Cf. Bk. IV, where describing Satan's mental conflict, he says :

"Begins his dire attempt ; which, nigh the birth  
Now rolling, boils in his tumultuous breast,  
And like a devilish engine back recoils  
On himself."

Prof. Elton remarks : "This passage forecasts the style of Milton's epic verse, and may be taken as the expression in a few lines of his faith about the supreme question. Evil is to prey upon itself and vanish : good shall not be the annihilating agent, for good must be far from any contact with evil : the destroying principle must turn upon itself with its proper function, destruction."

l. 594. *mix.....goodness* : and be separated for ever from virtue.

*when* : till.

l. 595. *gathered like scum* : One commentator writes : "This image is taken from the conjectures of astronomers concerning the dark spots which from time to time appear on the surface of the sun's body and after a while disappear again ; which they suppose to be the scum of that fiery matter which first breeds it, and then breaks through and consumes it." *Scum* may mean here the foreign matter which rises to the surface of liquors in boiling or fermentation ; froth.

ll. 596-597. This idea is expressed in the allegory of Sin and Death in *Paradise Lost II*, where the Hellhounds, the children of Sin, are described thus :

"For, when they list, into the womb  
That bred them they return and howl and gnaw  
My bowels their repast."

l. 598. *If this fail* : If this does not happen.

*The pillard.....stubble* : Even the most fixed things in the universe must be regarded as unstable ; we can believe in nothing.

*Pillared firmament* : The firmament pictured as the roof, the earth supported by pillars.

*Earth's base* : The foundation of the earth.

*stubble* : waste material.

l. 600. *against.....Heaven* : If the will of Heaven is otherwise ; against the purposes of the Almighty.

l. 603. *grisely legions* : terrible legions of Hell.

l. 604. *sooty flag of Acheron* : One of the four rivers of Hell described in P.L. II, thus :

“Sad Acheron, of sorrow, black and deep.”

‘Sooty flag’ probably was from the time of the Locusts of Fletcher : “All hell run out and sooty flags display.” Acheron is here used as a synonym for Hell. The black flag of Hell.

l. 605. *Harpies* : lit. mean ‘Snatchers or sporters.’ Represented in mythology as unclean monsters, with the heads of maidens, and with long claws and gaunt faces. “They are in Homer nothing but personified storm-winds, who are said to carry off anyone who had suddenly appeared from the earth.” (Class. Dic.)

*Hydras* : The Lernean nine-headed monster slain by Hercules. Milton often refers to it as a typical monster.

The line is reminiscent of P. L. II. 628 :

“Gorgons, and Hydras, and Chimaeras dire.”

l. 606. *’Twixt Africa and Ind* : From one end of the world to the other—west to east.

l. 607. *return his purchase back* : Disgorge his illgotten gains ; release his new-got victim.

*purchase* : booty. ‘To purchase’ originally meant to acquire by means fair or foul.

l. 609. *venturous* : bold.

l. 610. *yet* : nevertheless ; Though thy courage is useless.

*bold emprise* : bold enterprising nature.

l. 611. *stead* : help.

l. 612. *for other arms* : very different arms.

l. 613. *quell.....charms* : overcome the power of this hellish agent, dislocate.

l. 614. *unthread* : loosen ; *bare wand* : mere wand.

l. 615. *crumble* : cause to be shrivelled.

l. 616. *How dust.....relation* : How have you alone managed to come so near as to be able to tell this ?

l. 617. *care and utmost shifts* : Anxiety and the dire need of my situation.

l. 618. *surprisal* : her virtue being surprised.

l. 619. *a certain shepherd lad* : There is probably in these lines a reference to Charles Diodati, Milton's dearest friend, who died in 1638 and who inspired his noble Latin elegy, the Epitaphium Damonis. In that elegy Milton alludes to Diodati's knowledge of *simples* or healing herbs.

"There thou shalt cull me simples, and shalt teach  
Thy friend the name and healing powers of each."

l. 620. *of small regard to see to* : very slight in appearance.  
*to see to* : to look at.

l. 621. *virtuous plant* : plant possessing healing efficacy.

l. 622. *verdant* : green. To whose green leaves the morning sun gives a flattering appearance.

l. 623. The picture of the two friends engaged in their rural pastimes is in strict accordance with the conventions of pastoral poetry. Cf. Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar*.

l. 625. *hearken even to ecstasy* : listen until his mind reached a state of ecstatic joy.

l. 627. *simples* : medicinal herbs.

l. 628. *vigorous faculties* : potent properties.

l. 629. *unsightly* : ugly.

l. 630. *culled me out* : He plucked out for me.

l. 633. *bore* : refers to the plant of the root.

ll. 630-633. Verity remarks about the clumsy nature of this passage with its accumulation of '*buts*.'

l. 634. *unknown and like esteemed* : unknown and hence as little esteemed.

*like* : correspondingly.



l. 635. *clouted* : patched with a clout of leather or metal.

*shoon* : old pl. of 'shoe.'

l. 636. *Moly* : A white flower whose root was black, which Hermes gave to Ulysses as a protection against the charms of Circe. Cf. Homer : "It was black at the root, but the flower was like to milk. *Moly*, the gods call it, but it is hard for mortal men to dig."

l. 637. *wise* : Homer's constant epithet for Ulysses.

l. 638. *Haemony* : Thessaly, the magician's land, was in olden times called *Haemonia*. Milton adopts the name for his magic herb.

l. 639. *of most sovran use* : supremely efficacious.

l. 640. *mildew blast* : This is what causes the kind of pestilence called mildew ; dry east winds were supposed to be the cause of it. Cf. *Hamlet* III. iv. 64 :

"Like a mildewed ear  
Blasting his wholesome brother."

l. 641. *Furies* : evil spirits.

l. 642. *pursued it up etc.*, put it away in my wallet, though at that time I did not attach much importance to it.

l. 643. *Till.....compelled* : Till the present emergency reminded me of it.

l. 644. *I find it true* : I have satisfied myself regarding the efficacy of the root. It was that root that helped me to recognize the wicked enchanter in his disguise.

l. 646. *entered.....off* : 'I entered into the very midst of his treacherous enchantments, and yet escaped.'

*Lime-twigs* : snares ; refers to the practice of catching birds by means of twigs bird-limed.

l. 650. *brandished blade* : Cf. Hermes' advice to Ulysses : "When it shall be that Circe smites thee with her long wand, even then draw thy sharp sword from thy thigh, and spring on her, as one eager to slay her."

l. 651. *break his glass* : In Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, Book II, Sir Guyon breaks the golden cup of the enchantress, Excess.

On this passage Prof. Elton remarks : "Many threads

of associated story may be woven up here : Odysseus rushing upon Circe ; Guyon breaking into the bower of Acrasia ; and perhaps Caliban plotting against Prospero."

l. 652. *luscious* : delicious.

l. 654. *menace high* : terrible threats.

l. 655. *sons of Vulcan* : In *Aenid* viii, Virgil describes Cacus, one of the sons of Vulcan, vomiting a mass of smoke and wrapping his dwelling in blind darkness when he was pursued by Hercules.

l. 657. *apace* : quickly.

*puts by* : rejects. *goes about to rise* : attempts to rise.

ll. 659-665. Garnett in his monograph on Milton quotes a parallel passage from Calderon's *Magics Prodigioso*, where the Demon tempts Justina.

"Just : Thought is not in my power, but action is.

I will not move my foot to follow thee.

Demon : How wilt thou resist, Justina ?

Just : By my free will.

Demon : I must force thy will.

Just : It is invincible.

It were not free, if thou hadst power upon it."

l. 660. *your nerves.....alabaster* : "your sinews will all be turned to alabaster, and you will become a statue, or rooted to the spot, as was Daphne."

l. 661. *as Daphne was* : Daphne was an Arcadian maid, who, when pursued by Apollo, prayed for aid, and was consequently changed into a laurel-tree.

*root-bound* : held fast to the ground by roots.

l. 663. *the freedom of my mind* : my free will. Cf. P.L. I : "The mind is its own place."

l. 665. *corporeal rind* : the body that covers the mind.

l. 666. *immanacled* : chained.

*while Heaven sees good* : This power of yours will last only as long as God permits it.

l. 667. *From these far* : This is the Bower of Bliss.

l. 668. *here be thoughts* : Here you can find all the pleasures that a youthful fancy can conjure to itself.

*beget* : engender, give birth to.

l. 670. *when.....lively* : when the spirits are buoyant and the blood returns to the heart fresh and vigorous, just as the primrose buds return with the advent of the spring season in April.

Verity comments on this passage : " Comus's temptation of the Lady (especially his arguments later on, 710-736) resembles a scene in the religious play *Adamo* 1613, by the Italian poet Andreini, which deals with the fall of man, and is thought to have furnished some slight suggestions for *Paradise Lost*. Andreini makes the world personified, with its varieties, tempts Eve, and reading through the scene (V-5) in the translation by Hayley one is certainly reminded of this scene in *Comus*.

l. 672. *julep* : a sweet drink. *cordial* : heart-reviving.

l. 673. *flames and dances* : suggesting its sparkling appearance.

*crystal bounds* : The crystal glass which contains it.

l. 674. *of balm* : having a soothing effect.

l. 675. *that Nepenthes* : Evidently this was a drug which had the effect of lulling pain. Polydanna, wife of Thore, gave this drug to Helen, and she administered it to Menelaus at Sparta. Cf. *Odyssey* IV. 219. " Then Helen, daughter of Zeus, turned to new thoughts. Presently she cast a drug into the wine whereof they drank, a drug to lull all pain and anger, and bring forgetfulness of every sorrow. Whoso should drink a draught thereof, when it is mingled in the bowl, on that day he would let no tear fall down his cheeks, not though his father and his mother died." Spenser refers to Nepenthes in his *Faerie Queene* where he describes it as a drink " to assuage Hart's grief, and bitter gall away to chace."

l. 676. *jove-born* : Helen was the daughter of Zeus.

l. 677. *Is of such power &c.* : The proper construction of the passage is : " That Nepenthes is not of such power to stir up joy as this (julep is, nor is it) so friendly to life (nor) so cool to thirst."

l. 679. *why should.....delicacy* ? : you are being cruel to yourself when you thus reject these pleasures that I offer to your dainty body. " Nature gave you your beautiful

person to be held in trust on certain conditions, of which the most obligatory is that the body should have refreshment after toil, ease after pain. Yet this very condition you disregard, and deal harshly with yourself by refusing my proffered glass at a time when you are in need of food and rest." The idea in this passage resembles that of Shakespeare's sonnet IV : "Unthirfty loveliness, why does thou spend upon thyself thy beauty's legacy?"

l. 682. *invent.....trust* : go directly against the terms of the contract. The idea here is that nature has given certain things to man not as his absolute possession, but only on trust.

l. 683. *ill borrower* : bad borrower.

l. 684. *other terms* : conditions quite different from what you now accept.

l. 685. *unexempt condition* : condition from which no one can be exempted ; "not free by peculiar privilege" (Johnson).

l. 686. *By which.....subsist* : on which depends the existence of weak mortals.

l. 687. *Refreshment.....pain* : This is the condition—that the body should have refreshment after a period of toil. Cf. Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, i. 9, 40 :

"Sleep after toil, port after stormy seas.

East after war, death after life, doth greatly please."

l. 688. *That* : The antecedent of this relative pronoun is 'you'. It means 'you who.'

l. 689. *timely* : seasonable.

*have wanted* : have been yearning for.

l. 691. *'Twill.....lies* : I now see you in your true colours, a smooth-tongued villain, and I can no longer believe in your words.

l. 694. *aspects* : faces, referring to the monstrous rout of Comus.

l. 695. *oughly-headed* : This is the spelling in Milton's Ms. It means 'ugly-headed.'

l. 696. *brewed enchantments* : Referring to the drink in his crystal cup which is enchanted.

l. 697. *credulous* : Too easily believing.

*l.* 698. *vizored.....forgery* : with your falsehood dissembled in an honest countenance and base deceit.

*forgery* : deceit.

*l.* 700. *liquorish baits* : pleasures tempting to the appetite.

*liquorish* : sensual.

*fit.....brute* : which can tempt only brutish natures, but can have no influence over me.

*l.* 701. *a draught for Juno* : A drink fit to be served to Juno even.

*l.* 702. *treasonous* : traitorous.

*l.* 703. *None.....things* : Cf. a parallel passage in *Medea* of Euripides : "The gifts of the bad man are without profit."

*l.* 704. *that which.....appetite* : The wise and virtuous man controls his cravings and likes to enjoy only really good things. The senses of such a man will accept only what his sober judgment has found to be good. The idea here is Platonic. Plato says in his *Republic* : "The soul has a rational principle and an irrational or appetitive, and when the former controls the latter, the desires are for what is good only."

*l.* 707. *budge doctors of the Stoicfur* : solemn philosophers of the stoic sect.

*budge* : solemn, stiff, formal. Dr. Murray comments : *Budge doctor* may have originally meant one who wore 'budge fur,' i.e. lambskin with the wool dressed outwards, as worn by Cambridge B.A.'s. Milton in his phrase *Budge Doctors* is probably thinking of the *budge bachelors*, 'a company dressed in gowns trimmed with Budge, who took part in the procession on Lord Mayor's Day.'

*Stoics* : a sect of philosophers in Ancient Greece who led a life of stern abstinence, and considered virtue to be the chief good. They were severe moralists.

*l.* 708. *fetch their precepts* : follow the principles.

*The Cynic Tub* : Cf. Diogenes, a famous Greek philosopher who led a life of extreme austerity. "He

wore coarse clothing, lived on the plainest food, slept in porticoes, or in the street, and finally, according to the common story, took up his residence in a tub." The cynics, like the stoics, despised all human pleasures, particularly those of the senses.

*l. 709. the lean and sallow Abstinence* : A life of stern self-denial which makes the man lean and sallow-complexioned.

*l. 710.* The idea in this passage closely resembles that of Jeremy Taylor's sermon on the use of Feasting : "It is unimaginable that Nature should be the mother.....to the beasts of the forest and the spawn of fishes, to every plant and fungus, to cats and owls, to moles and bats, making her storehouse always to stand open to them : and that for the lord of all these, even to the noblest of her productions, she should have made no provision, and only produced in one appetites sharp as the stomachs of wolves, troublesome as the tiger's hunger, and then run away leaving art and chance, violence and study, to feed us and clothe us."

*l. 711. unwithdrawing hand* : Nature's bounties are not only full, but also continuous.

*l. 714. But all to* : Unless it be to.  
*curious* : fastidious.

*ll. 710-714.* Nature has meant these pleasures for our enjoyment.

*l. 716. green shops* : their workshops on mulberry trees.  
*smooth-haired* : of smooth texture.

*l. 717. her sons* : nature's sons, *i.e.*, mortals.

*that no.....plenty* : so that no part of the world might be without her bounty.

*l. 718. in her own loins* : deep in the bowels of the earth.

*l. 719. hatched* : shut up, stored. *Hutch* originally meant chest or coffer.

*all-worshipped* : worshipped by all.

*l. 721. to store her children with* : with which to enrich her children.

*l. 721. a pet of temperance* : a sudden and foolish fit of abstinence.

*feed on pulse* : There is a scriptural allusion here to the story of Daniel and his three companions who refused the dainty dishes offered by the King of Babylon and fed on pulse and water instead. Cf. *Par. Reg.* II. 278.

"Or as a guest with Daniel at his pulse."

*l. 722. frieze* : A kind of coarse woollen cloth.

*ll. 723-724.* The blessings showered by God on mankind will remain unappreciated.

*and yet despised* : "Men would be despising the rich gifts of which they foolishly made no use and therefore could form no just opinion."

*l. 725. And we.....bastards* : The proper construction of the passage is : "And we should serve him as (if he were) a grudging master and a penurious niggard of his wealth".

*l. 726. a penurious.....wealth* : one who refuses to enjoy his wealth properly.

*l. 727. live.....sons* : If we deny to ourselves the bounties of Nature we shall be confessing ourselves to be the illegitimate children of Nature with no claim to enjoy her gifts. Comus says : "We should enjoy the full rights of sonship in relation to our parent Nature".

*ll. 728-729. who.....fertility* : The antecedent of 'who' is Nature. Nature, Comus says, will be overloaded with her own abundance, and so suffocated by such unused plenty.

*surcharged* : overloaded.

*waste fertility* : wasted abundance, since there will be no one to enjoy it.

*l. 730.* Comus describes such a state of things in greater detail.

*cumbered* : encumbered ; over-weighted.

*winged air darked with plumes* : The air being rendered dark by the flight of innumerable birds.

*l. 731. over multitude* : number ; such that their keepers will find it difficult to manage them.

ll. 732-736. This is really a far-fetched conceit reminiscent of the metaphysical poets. One commentator argues that these lines are intended to be in keeping with the wily nature of Comus, and "to expose that ostentatious sophistry by which a bad cause is generally supported."

*The sea.....swell* : The sea would be over-full of fish.

*The unsought.....stars* : By 'diamonds' Milton probably means only gems in general. The 'diamond' rocks, when they are cut out spread over the whole surface of the sea, thus giving the sea a flattering appearance as if it were covered with stars.

A better sense can be given to the passage by taking 'deep' to mean 'the bowels of the earth'. Therefore, heart of the deep. The surface of the earth's centre contain diamonds ; when men do not quarry these diamonds and leave them unsought, the diamond rocks grow and come out on the surface of the earth, blazing like stars.

l. 733. *emblaze* : cause to blaze.

l. 734. *grow inured to light* : get accustomed to dazzling brilliance.

l. 735. *with shameless* : with a lack of reverent admiration. By custom men's eyes will become less sensitive to the light of the sun.

It is significant that in Milton's Ms. instead of 'bestud with stars' we have 'bestud the centre with their star-light', *centre* meaning of course 'the centre of the earth'.

l. 737. *coy* : reserved.

*cozened* : deceived.

l. 738. *same.....virginity* : That self-same virginity of which people speak so much in praise.

ll. 739-755. Masson comments on this passage : "The idea that runs through these seventeen lines is a favourite one with the old poets ; and Warton cites parallel passages from Shakespeare, Daniel, Fletcher, and Drayton.....see Shakespeare's first six sonnets, which are pervaded by the idea in 'all its subtleties'. Milton makes a sophisticated tempter express these sentiments. The Elizabethan poets



were always broaching in earnest the obligation of Beauty to enjoy the pleasures of the senses and to continue its existence through its offspring, instead of perishing with its own end. Cf. Sonnet XI. Shakespeare :

"Let those whom Nature hath not made for store,  
Harsh, featureless, and rude, barrenly perish ;  
Look whom she best endowed, she gave the more ;  
Which bounteous gift thou shouldst in bounty cherish ;  
She carved thee for her seal, and meant thereby  
Thou shouldst print more, nor let that copy die."

*Beauty Nature's coin* : Nature's worth is always measured in terms of Beauty, which is nature's currency. Beauty is not intended to be closely secreted, but to be put to general use.

*must not.....current* : Cf. the idea in Shakespeare's sonnet IV.

"Beauteous niggard, why dost thou abuse  
The bounteous largess given thee to give ?  
Thy unus'd beauty must be tomb'd with thee,  
Which, used, lives th' executor to be."

l. 741. *mutual and partaken bliss* : bliss shared with others.

*the good.....bliss* : The virtue of beauty is best seen only when the delight afforded by it is enjoyed not merely by the possessor but also by others.

l. 742. *unsavoury.....itself* : not pleasing if Beauty refuses to lend itself to the enjoyment of others.

l. 743. *let slip time* : allow time to slip away.

*like a neglected rose &c.* : Cf. the idea in the passage in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* I. i. 76-78 :

'Earthlier happy is the rose distilled  
Than that which withering on the virgin thorn  
Grows, lives and dies in single blessedness'.

l. 745. *beauty is Nature's brag* : Beauty, being the product of nature, is the one thing of which nature boasts justly.

l. 746. *and must.....workmanship* : and Nature takes delight in parading this possession of hers in places where men mostly assemble, so that men may admire her handiwork.

*l. 747. most* : as many as possible.

*l. 748. It is.....home* : It is only plain working persons that need stay at home. There is here the same play upon words as in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* : "Homekeeping youth have ever homely wits."

*l. 749. They.....thence* : Hence are they called housewives.

*coarse.....wool* : women with coarse complexions and dull cheeks are good enough for household occupations. They may be fit enough to ply the sampler &c., but not you.

*l. 750. cheeks of sorry grain* : cheeks of a poor fallow complexion. *grain* : hue.

*l. 751. sampler* : a piece of wool work containing specimens or *samples* were worked out for embroidery.

*to tease* : to comb or card. *Teasing* is the method by which the surface of the cloth is made smooth.

Comus says that it will be a pity if the lady spends her days in this manner.

*l. 752. vermeil-tinctured* : ruddy.

*l. 753. tresses like the morn* : like "Fair Aurora, with her rosy hair." A common comparison in classical poetry.

*ll. 752-753.* Your beauty will be wasted if you rest contented with plying the sampler or teasing the housewife's wool.

*l. 754. There was.....gifts* : The gifts which Nature has bestowed on you have been designed for quite other purposes.

*l. 755. be advised* : i.e., by me.

*ll. 756-761.* Spoken aside by the Lady.

*l. 756. I had.....air* : I had not intended to talk a word in such a wicked atmosphere.

*l. 757. juggler* : enchanter.

*l. 758. would.....judgment* : would attempt to cast a spell over my reasoning faculties as well.

*as mine eyes* : in the same manner as he has charmed my eyes already.

*l. 759. Obtruding.....garb* : forcing me to listen to specious arguments presented in an attractive manner. Cf. the description of Belial in *Par. Lost II* : "his tongue dropt manna, and could make the worse appear. The better reason, to perplex and dash maturest counsels."

*pranked* : decked in a showy manner.

*l. 760. bolt* : *sift to bolt* really means to sift the meal from the bran.

*ll. 760-761.* "I hate to see vice picking out her subtle arguments while virtue is tongue-tied, and unable to check her proud enemy."

*l. 761. virtue.....pride* : virtue permits the arguments of vice to pass unchallenged.

*l. 762. do not.....Nature* : Do not attribute such base motives to innocent Nature.

*l. 763. as if.....abundance* : as if she desired that her children should intemperately enjoy her bounties.

*l. 764. good cateress* : virtuous provider.

*l. 765. means.....good* : Intends her gifts to be enjoyed only by good men.

*l. 766. that live.....laws* : who are temperate in their cravings.

*l. 767. and holy.....Temperance* : and who follow the principles of Temperance. This is the Lady's reply to Comus' ridicule of a life of sobriety as a mere freak. Dowden remarks in his *Transcripts and Studies* : "There is much in the lady which resembles the youthful Milton himself—he, the Lady of his College, and we may well believe that the great debate concerning Temperance was not altogether dramatic (where, indeed, is Milton truly dramatic?), but was in part a record of passages in the poet's own spiritual history."

*ll. 768-774.* If the gifts of Nature were distributed equally amongst all and not heaped on a few luxurious people as is now the case, then as Shakespeare says in *King Lear*, "distribution should undo excess, and each man have enough." This is Milton himself speaking, not the young girl.

*l. 769. beseeming* : proper.

*l. 770. lewdly pampered* : wickedly gluttonous, a very expressive compound coined by Milton.

*l. 771. with vast excess* : in undue proportion.

*l. 773. unsuperfluous* : 'not superabundant'.

*l. 774. no whit.....store* : Nature would in no way be overloaded with her abundant possessions.

*l. 776. His praise due paid* : His praises would be duly offered to Him.

*swinish gluttony* : swinish gluttons.

*l. 777. never looks.....feast* : never remember God in the midst of their enjoyment.

*l. 778. besotted* : sottish.

*l. 779. Crams.....feeder* : stuffs his belly and in his pride even speaks ill of God Himself.

*ll. 779-806.* These lines are not found in the Cambridge and Bridgewater Mss. "The passage was added by Milton to bring out the moral of the masque. He may have thought that there was no likelihood of *Comus* being acted again, and that the incongruity between the youthful speaker and her speech would be less apparent in reading the poem." (Verity). The ardour with which the Lady speaks is Milton's own.

*l. 780. To him.....chastity* : In reply to the contemptuous terms in which you have spoken of chastity.

*l. 782. sun-clad power of chastity* : Cf. *l. 425* : "The sacred rays of chastity." Chastity invested with the sun's radiance and the sun's influence.

*l. 783. fain.....say* : I would like to say something.

*yet to what end?* : But I know that my words will have no effect on you.

*l. 785. the sublime notion and high mystery* : We are reminded of Milton's *Apology for Smectymnus*, where he tells of his early studies of the "divine volume of Plato", from whom he learned of the "abstracted sublimities" of Chastity and Love. There he speaks also of his study of the Holy

Scripture "unfolding these chaste and high mysteries with timeless care infused, that the body is for the Lord, and the Lord for the body."

This is the real Miltonic idea which *Comus* is intended to bring out.

*sublime notion* : lofty idea.

*high mystery* : mystery is used in the sense of "a truth specially revealed to men."

ll. 788-789. *thou art.....lot* : you do not deserve to know more and thus enjoy greater bliss than you now have.

l. 790. *dear wit* : The epithet 'dear' is used here in a contemptuous sense. Your wisdom of which you are so proud.

*gay rhetoric* : rhetoric which of course dazzles, but which is really only the instrument of sophistry.

l. 791. *that.....fence* : who certainly dost excel in brilliant argumentation.

*fence* : "power of fencing with words or chopping logic."

l. 792. *Thou.....convinced* : you do not deserve an answer ; I would not try to prove that you are in the wrong.

l. 793. *the uncontrolled worth* : "insuppressible excellence."

l. 794. *kindle.....spirits* : so kindle my soul that it would be carried out of itself.

*rapt spirits* : spirits that would be enraptured as a consequence.

l. 795. *To such.....vehemence* : and possess me with such divine fury.

l. 796. *That dumb.....sympathize* : that my words will move to sympathy even dumb creatures.

l. 797. *brute Earth* : senseless Earth.

*would lend her nerves* : would become sensible and listen to my words.

*and shake* : as a sign of which she would tremble.

*l. 798. magic structures* : referring to the palace of Comus.

*l. 799. were.....head* : totter and engulf you in its ruins.

On this speech of the Lady, Masson says : " A recurrence, by the sister, with much more mystic fervour, to that Platonic and Miltonic doctrine which had already been propounded by the Elder Brother." But we feel that the arguments of Comus are more convincing. Comus is certainly the most human character in the poem. The speech of the Lady is so full of lofty and abstract ideas, that even the poet's Puritan fervour is not able to save it from becoming tedious.

*l. 800. she fables not* : she speaks true.

*I feel.....power* : I very much fear that her words are inspired by some superior power.

*set off* : supported ; enhanced.

*l. 802. though not mortal* : though I am not mortal and hence need not fear extinction.

*yet a cold.....crew* : " a shudder of horror comes upon me, though not mortal, like that which comes upon Saturn's followers when Jove thunders in his wrath and dooms them to be chained in the lowest Hell."

*a shuddering dew* : the cold sweat produced by extreme terror.

*dips me all o'er* : moistens my body.

*l. 804. speaks.....crew* : The allusion is to the story of the contest between Jove and the Titans. Zeus was provided with thunder and lightning by the Cyclops, and with the aid of those weapons was able to hurl the Titans down to Erebus, a region far below Hell, where the Titans were kept chained.

*speaks thunder and chains* : ' speaks thunder ' means thunders ; ' speaks chains ' ' sentences them to imprisonment.'

*l. 805. I must dissemble* : I must mask my fear.

*come, no more* : Now Comus addresses the Lady.

*l. 806. mere moral babble* : meaningless prattle of uncompromising moralists.

*l. 807. the canon laws of our foundation* : The established rules of our institution, as of 'a College of Pleasure.' "A humorous application of the language of universities and other foundations." (Keightley).

*ll. 809-810. yet 'tis.....blood* : This is only the depression of spirits produced by melancholy or black bile predominating in the system. The allusion is to the old belief that there were four primary humours in the human body—blood, phlegm, choler, and melancholy (lit. black bile)—, the superabundance of any one of which in a man's system determined his character. Cf. Nash's *Terrors of the Night* : " (Melancholy) sinketh down to the bottom like the lees of the wine, corrupteth the blood, and is the cause of lunacy."

*l. 811. this will cure all straight* : This is only a temporary indisposition which will vanish soon.

*one sip of this* : offering a cup to the Lady.

*l. 813. beyond* : surpassing.

*l. 815. ye mistook* : you misunderstood my instructions.

The escape of Comus is merely to enable the poet to introduce the Sabrina legend in the story.

*l. 817. without his rod.....power* : Unless you reverse his magical wand and repeat his charm backwards, which alone will have power to break the spell he has cast now. Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* describes how Circe restored the followers of Ulysses to their human forms by adopting this method. "As old as the belief in magic itself seems to have been the belief that the effects of enchantment could be undone by reversing the spell, pronouncing the words of the charm backward." (Masson).

*l. 820. disturbed* : agitated.

*bethink me* : remember.

*l. 822. Meliboeus old* : This is the name of a shepherd in Virgil's *Eclogue*. In these two lines Milton probably refers to Spenser who narrates the story of Sabrina in his *Faerie Queene* II. 10. 14. The tale is told by others also e.g. Geoffrey of Monmouth, Drayton &c. But it is Spenser's version of the legend that Milton follows here.

- l. 823. *The soothest shepherd* : The truest poet.

Dowden remarks on the resolution of the plot : "The deliverance of their sister would be impossible but for supernatural interposition, the aid offered by the Attendant Spirit from Jove's court. In other words, Divine Providence is asserted. Not without higher than human aid is the Lady rescued, and through the weakness of the mortal instruments of divine grace but half the intended work is accomplished."

- l. 825. *moist curb* : because Sabrina was a river-deity.  
*sways* : rules.

l. 826. *Sabrina* : The legend goes that Lochrine, the son of Brutus, inherited from his father England, leaving Scotland and Wales to his brothers. He loved a German princess named Estrildis, by whom he had a daughter named Sabrina. But circumstances forced him to marry Gwendolen, the daughter of the King of Cornwall. This is Milton's prose version of the subsequent story : "But when once his fear was off by the death of Corineus, not content with secret enjoyment, divorcing Gwendolen, he makes Estrildis his queen. Gwendolen, all in rage, departs into Cornwall, where Plandan, the son she had by Lochrine, was hitherto brought up by Corineus, his grandfather ; and gathering an army of her father's friends and subjects, gives battle to her husband by the river Sture, wherein Lochrine, shot with an arrow, ends his life. But not so ends the fury of Gwendolen, for Estrildis and her daughter Sabra she throws into a river, and to have a moment of revenge, proclaims that the stream be thenceforth called after the damsel's name, which by length of time is changed now to *Sabrina* or *Sévern*."

- l. 827. *whilom* : of old.

l. 828. *Brute* : Brutus, the Trojan, the great-grandson of Aeneas.

l. 830. *stepdame* : See the actual relationship as given in note on l. 826.

- l. 831. *her fair innocence* : this fair and innocent girl.

l. 834. *pearled wrists* : wrists decked with pearls. This is perhaps only a poetic way of saying that their wrists were dripping with water. There is still further justification for



the use of the epithet in the fact that pearls were supposed to exist in the waters of the Severn.

l. 835. *aged Nereus' hall* : The home of old Nereus at the bottom of the sea. Nereus was the father of the Nereids or sea-nymphs.

l. 836. *piteous of* : out of pity for.

• *reared her lank head* : raised her drooping head.

l. 837. *imbathe* : bathe in.

l. 838. *nectared lovers.....asphodil* : 'in the baths fragrant with nectar and strewn with asphodel-blooms.' Asphodel was a flower of the lily family 'the perfect mythical variety of which grew in the meadows of heaven (Elysium), where heroes took their repose.'

l. 839. *porch and inlet of each sense* : The gateways of the various physical senses. Cf. *Hamlet* : "The porches of mine ear."

l. 840. *ambrosial* : of heavenly fragrance and potency.

l. 841. *a quick immortal change* : a change that quickly made her immortal.

l. 842. *made* : being thus made.

*still she retains &c.* : she is now the tutelary deity of the Severn finding her enjoyment in scenes of pastoral quiet and happiness.

l. 844. *herds along meadows* : herds grazing in meadows at twilight.

l. 845. *Helping blasts* : Remedying blights caused by evil spirits, 'urchin' being used in the sense of 'goblin.' Strictly 'urchin' means 'the hedgehog which was in English folklore regarded as a diabolical beast of ill works. This was as Warton says due to "its solitariness, the ugliness of its appearance, and from a popular opinion that it sucked or poisoned the udders of cows..... Its shape was sometimes supposed to be assumed by mischievous elves." If we take 'urchin' to mean 'hedgehog,' then, the phrase would mean : "blights or malignant breaths sent upon 'produce or vine' by the hedgehog."

*ill-luck signs* : appearances of bad omen.

l. 846. *shrewd* : malicious, mischievous. Evidently a spirit belonging to the type of Robin Goodfellow.

l. 847. *vial'd* : contained in vials.

l. 849. *carol her goodness* : Sing praises of her virtue in their rustic songs.

l. 850. *throw stream* : This is "a recognized method in pastoral verse of showing gratitude."

l. 852. *the old swain* : Melibocus. This is Milton's own addition to the legend of Sabrina. "Neither Geoffrey of Monmouth nor Spenser has the development of the legend." (Masson).

l. 853. *the clasping charm* : the charm which has chained the lady in alabaster. Cf. l. 660.

*thaw* : melt.

l. 854. *If she.....song* : If she be properly invoked by songs addressed to her.

l. 857. *hard-besetting need* : dire necessity of help.

\* l. 858. *adjoining verse* : verse charged with something sacred, e.g., what is contained in ll. 867-889.

l. 859. *end* : Thus has Milton expounded the main idea of the masque in lofty blank verse. Of course it is the sermon of a Puritan, but what a strange specimen of its kind, with its gorgeous argumentation and "a thousand flowers from Greece and the Renaissance, this reflection of a self-chosen and austere life with the youthful bloom still upon it fresh and pure !" It is therefore with a consciousness of having achieved his purpose satisfactorily that the poet quickens and lightens the movement towards the close. We follow the tripping measure of these lines with great delight.

l. 861. *glassy* : calm, placid.

ll. 862-863. *In twisted.....hair* : with your flowing locks of amberhued hair dripping with water and knit with wreathed garlands of lilies.

*The loose train* : The flowing locks of her hair.

*amber-dropping* : This epithet has been variously explained. Verity takes it to mean 'wet with the amber-

coloured water of the river.' Another meaning is suggested 'with the luminous clearness and fragrance of amber.' It will be best to take it to mean that Sabrina has hair of the hue of amber through which the water drips.

"In these cases the adjective certainly adds to the picturesqueness of the narrative ; and it may be literally true, because the tint of the river is affected by the soil of the land through which it flows. Of course, Sabrina will have amber hair to symbolize the river-waves." (Verity).

*l. 865. silver lake* : i.e., The Severn—a broad river.

*l. 867.* The various deities of the waters are invoked in order that Sabrina may answer their prayer. They belong to classical mythology, but are in no way inappropriate, since Milton has even in the opening part of the masque described Britain as being under the charge of Neptune and his "tutelary gods."

*l. 868. great Oceanus* : The god of the old river which was supposed to be flowing round the world for ever. This river is also called in *Comus*, e.g. Atlantic Stream, *l. 97*.

*l. 869. earth-shaking Neptune's mace* : The trident of Neptune, who is called by Homer, *the earth shaker* : "either because he is the lord of earthquakes or simply because the waves of the sea are for ever beating the land."

*l. 870. Tethys' pace* : Tethys was the wife of Oceanus and the mother of the Ocean nymphs. She is described here as venerable and slow-footed—probably reminiscent of Hesiod's description of her as 'the venerable.'

*l. 871. hoary Nereus* : Cf. note on *l. 835*.

*l. 872. the Carpathian wizard's hook* : The reference is to Proteus 'the grey prophet of the sea' ; he had a shepherd's hook with which he shepherded "the seals of Neptune." He is called 'Carpathian wizard' because he dwelt near the isle of Carpathus, Cf. Virgil's *Georgics* IV : "In the sea-god's Carpathian gulf there lives a seer, Proteus, of the sea's own hu—all things are known to him, those which are, those which have been, and those which drag their length through the advancing future."

*l. 873. Triton* : In *Lycidas* called "the Herald of the

Sea." He blew his wreathed horn at the command of Neptune in order to calm the restless waves of the sea. The epithet 'scaly' is because the lower part of his body was like that of a fish.

*winding* : 'crooked.'

l. 874. *soothsaying Glaucus* : a sea-god supposed to possess prophetic gifts. The old legend was that he was a Boeotian fisherman who ate of a certain herb and was consequently changed into a marine deity—The words 'soothsaying' and 'spell' refer to his prophetic powers.

l. 875. *Leucothea* : lit. 'white goddess.' This was the name by which Ino, the daughter of Cadmus, was known after she threw herself into the sea in order to avoid her enraged husband, Athanias.

l. 876. *her son* : Melicertes who was drowned and defied along with his mother. In his new role as sea-deity he was called Palaemon. He was worshipped by the Romans as the god of harbours.

l. 877. *tinsel-slippered feet* : This is the permanent epithet given to Thetis in Homer. 'Tinsel' was in Milton's time a cloth of dazzling texture. "By this epithet the reader could figure to himself luminous trembling light, and also the image of Thetis on the silver radiance of the flashing waves." (Schmidt).

l. 878. *sirens* : The three sirens were Parthenope, Ligea, and Lucosia. *Parthenope* was supposed to have been buried at Naples. Cf. Milton, *Ad Leonoram* : "Naples, why dost thou boast, too credulous, the clear-voiced siren, and the famed shrine of Parthenope, child of Achelous?"

l. 880. *ligea's golden comb* : Virgil describes Ligea as a sea-nymph who smooths her hair with a golden comb.

ll. 881-882. The proper construction would be : "Wherewith she sleeks her soft alluring locks seated on diamond rocks."

*sleeking* : making glossy.

l. 885. *leave* : lift.

l. 886. *coral-paven* : the bottom of the river paved with coral.

*l.* 887. *bridle in* : restrain.

About the appearance of Sabrina, Verity comments : "From the stage-directions in other Masques it may be inferred that the appearance of the river-goddess would be effected as in a modern theatre. Part of the centre of the stage would be displaced, and through the aperture the goddess would rise, seated in her car and surrounded by a group of nymphs in picturesque dresses. The introduction in this way of deities—especially deities of the sea or rivers—was a favourite device with Masque-writers, as it gave scope for the skill of Inigo Jones, the great architect, who often designed the scenery and stage-mechanism of Masques."

*l.* 890. *rushy-fringed* : fringed with rushes.

*l.* 891. *osiers* : are water-willows or their branches.  
*dank* : damp.

*l.* 893. *thick set.....blue* : thickly inlaid with agate and adorned with azure brilliance of turquois.  
*sheen* : brightness.

*l.* 894. *that.....strays* : "The reflex of the sheen strays on the bottom as the surface water ripples while stirred by the chariot. The subject of 'strays' is *sheen* not *turkis* and *emerald* ; so that there is no need, with some editors, to object that emeralds cannot stray in a river-bed." (Elton).

*l.* 895. *fleet* : flowing rapidly.

*l.* 896. *printless feet* : leaving no print of footsteps behind.

*ll.* 897-898. *that bend not* : This is a very old idea. Cf. Ben Jonson's *Sad Shepherd* :

"Her treading would not bend a blade of grass,  
Or shake the downy blow-ball from his stalk."

*ll.* 904-905. *to undo.....distressed* : to break the potent spell which has placed this virgin in great distress.

*l.* 907. *unblessed* : accursed.

*l.* 908. *my office best* : the best of my duties.

*ll.* 911-919. This idea of the efficacy of sprinkling Milton probably got from Fletcher's *Faithful Shepherdess*, where the River God revives Amoret :

“ If thou be’st a virgin pure,  
 I can give a present cure ;  
 Take a drop into thy wound  
 From my watery locks, more round  
 Than orient pearl.....  
 The blood returns. I never saw  
 A fairer mortal ; now doth break  
 The deadly slumber. Virgin, speak.”

l. 912. *of precious cure* : of marvellous curative power.

l. 913. *thrice* : a mystic number often used in old legends.

l. 916. *venomed* : enchanted.

l. 917. *glutinous* : sticky.

l. 921. *Amphitrite* : Wife of Neptune. Homer identifies her with the sea itself.

l. 923. *sprung.....line* : This genealogy is very interesting and is made much use of in early English verse. Anchises was the father of Aeneas, who was the father of Ascanius from whom was descended Brutus. Lochrine was the son of Brutus.

*brimmed* : full to the brim.

l. 927. *snowy* : snow-clad.

l. 928. *singed* : scorching. The dog-days of Midsummer.

l. 929. *tresses* : “ the foliage of the trees and shrub along the banks.”

l. 930. *wet October* : characterized by torrential rains.

l. 931. *thy molten crystal* : Referring to the water of the river clear as crystal.

l. 934. “ May thy lofty head be crowned round with many a tower and terrace, and here and there (may thy lofty head be crowned) with groves of myrrh and cinnamon (growing) upon thy banks.” This explanation seems to be rather strained. It would be better to take it to mean : “ May thy head be crowned *round* with towers, and may thy banks be (crowned) *upon* (or decked) with groves.”

What does ‘head’ mean ? Does it refer to the source of the river ? Then the poet intends to say that towers and terraces may adorn the source of the river in the Welsh hills. Or, the poet may be thinking of the river-goddess, “ a kind of *turrita cybele*, with a tiara of towers.”

Here the song ends according to the Bridgewater Ms. Of the concluding part of the song containing the good wishes, Prof. Masson comments : "The whole of this poetic blessing on the Severn and its neighbourhood, involving the wish of what we should call 'solid commercial prosperity,' would go to the heart of the assemblage at Ludlow."

l. 942. *Not a waste.....ground* : Let there not be a superfluous or needless sound till we have come to a holier atmosphere.

l. 945. *This gloomy covert* : The Spirit is evidently pointing out of a window of Comus' stately palace into the wood.

l. 949. *gratulate* : welcome.

l. 950. *wished presence* : presence for which they have been yearning.

*and beside* : 'and where, besides.'

l. 952. *jigs* : lively rustic dances.

l. 953. *catch.....spot* : meet them engaged in their merry making.

l. 955. *will.....cheer* : will give them greater delight.

l. 958. Here the scene changes ; when the curtain rises the stage is occupied by peasants engaged in a dance. To them comes the Attendant Spirit with the words : "Back, shepherds, back !"

l. 959. *Enough your play* : We have had enough of your dancing.

l. 960. *duck or nod* : words used to describe the uncouth dancing and awkward bows of rustics.

l. 961. *trippings* : dances to a tripping measure.

l. 962. *lighter toes.....court guise* : These phrases are used to describe the grace of movement of the Lady and her two brothers.

*court guise* : courtly mien.

l. 963. *Mercury* : The herald of the gods, represented as having winged ankles. His name is used here as symbolic both of agility and refinement.

l. 964. *mincing Dryades* : The Dryades are wood-nymphs here described as mincing, tripping with short dainty steps.

l. 965. *leas* : meadows.

l. 966. In Ben Jonson's masque entitled *Satyr* there is a similar scene where the Satyr 'fetches out of the wood the Lord Spencer's eldest son' and introduces him. Masson remarks : "Imagine the cheering when Lawes, advancing with the three young ones, addressed his speech to the Earl and Countess."

l. 968. *so goodly grown* : grown so handsome.

l. 970. *timely* : sufficiently early.

l. 972. *assays* : trials.

ll. 974-975. *To triumph.....intemperance* : This is the main purpose of the masque, the triumph of virtue over sensual folly and intemperance.

l. 976. The first fifteen lines of the song were in the actual performance sung at the beginning of the Masque by the Attendant Spirit. The song resembles in rhyme and rhythm the song of Ariel in the *Tempest* V. 188-94 : "Where the bee sucks, there suck I etc."

l. 977. *happy climes* : Elysian plains.

l. 978. *where.....sky* : where the sun shines always in the broad heavens.

l. 980. *liquid* : clear ; *suck air* : inhale the sweet air.

l. 982. *his daughters three* : They were named Aegle, Cynthia, and Hesperia ; they were famed for their sweet song.

l. 983. *golden tree* : the tree of the golden apples.

l. 984. *crisp'd shades* : The reference here is to the foliage of the trees, which is curled as in spring when the leaves are unfolding, or by the wind.

l. 985. *spruce* : trim ; neat. Milton is very fond of describing the elegance of Nature.

l. 986. *The Graces* : The three Graces of classical mythology—Euphrosyne, Aglaia, Thalia—who "personified the refinements and elevated joys of life."

*Rosy-bosomed Hours* : The Hours Horce of classical mythology, who personified the Seasons ; the course of the seasons was described as the dance of the Horce. "Milton thinks



of them in their more gracious aspect, as existing to promote the prosperity of everything that grows, and as beautiful."

l. 989. *west winds* : The Zephyrs described usually in poetry as laden with fragrance.

*musky* : fragrant.

l. 990. *cedarn alleys* : alleys of cedar trees.

l. 991. *nard and cassia* : In *Paradise Lost* V they are described as 'flowering odours.'

*nard* : is an unguent from some scented plant. *cassia* is a pungent kind of cinnamon.

l. 992. *Iris* : The goddess of the Rainbow in classical mythology. *Humid bow* is the rainbow.

l. 993. *blow* : cause to blossom.

l. 995. *purpled* : with an embroidered edge.

*flowers.....shew* : flowers with such a glorious combination of colours as can be seen in the rainbow.

l. 996. *drenches.....dew* : soaks with heavenly dew.

l. 997. *if your ears be true* : "if you have minds fine enough to perceive the real meaning of the legends I am about to cite."

*true* : capable of understanding such truth.

l. 999. *Adonis oft reposes &c.* : Adonis was the beloved of Aphrodite ; he died of a wound which he received from a wild boar, but was permitted by the gods to spend half the year with Aphrodite, and half in the nether world.

The word *Assyrian* in l. 1002 refers to the Asiatic origin of the tale, as is seen from the name 'Adonis' itself which is a Semitic word, meaning 'Lord.' In P.L. I, Milton gives the story in greater detail, that the Assyrian prototype of Adonis, Thammuz, who also died under similar circumstances, is said to be mourned annually by the damsels of Lebanon. (P.L. I, 446). "The disappearance of the youth for six months to the world below meant the apparent decay of nature in winter ; and his reappearance in spring was kept with such a feast as is described in the fifteenth Idyll of Theocritus."

*Beds of hyacinth and roses* : The Garden of Adonis, a

place of fabled fertility, where, Adonis was supposed to live with Aphrodite.

*l. 1000. waxing well of* : recovering from.

*l. 1002. Assyrian queen* : Aphrodite whose worship originated from the East. She was for a long time identified with Astarte ; " Her connection with Adonis clearly points to Syria."

*l. 1003. Far above* : Above Astarte. Referring to the position of Cupid and Psyche.

*in spangled sheen* : in glittering radiance.

*l. 1004. Celestial Cupid* : The love of Aphrodite for Adonis is a type of the earthly love, while that of Psyche for Cupid is a type of celestial love. Cupid according to this legend is the lover of Psyche (the human soul). Psyche loves Cupid because of her curiosity, but is re-united to him after passing through many trials and tortures. Milton refers to this story just in order to show that pure love has a place even among the gods. Masson remarks : " Comus had misapprehended Love, knew nothing of it except its vile counterfeit.....had been outwitted and defeated. But there is true love, and it is to be found in Heaven."

*l. 1004. advanced* : raised high.

*l. 1006. her wandering labours long* : Refers to the wanderings of Psyche after Cupid left her. From place to place she went, persecuted by Venus.

*l. 1007. among* : The preposition governs ' gods.'

*l. 1010. blissful* : blest.

*l. 1011. youth and joy* : The offspring of heavenly love. Perennial youth and joy can be enjoyed only after going through the trials and temptations of the world.

*l. 1013. I can fly &c.* : Now that the spirit's task is done he is free to soar wherever he pleases.

*l. 1014. the green earth's end* : Probably the Cape De Verde Islands, beyond which, the ancients believed the world did not extend.

*l. 1015. bowed welkin* : arched firmament.

*where.....bend* : " where the arched sky curves slowly towards the horizon."

*welkin* : the region of the clouds. *slow* : slowly.

l. 1017. *corners of the moon* : The horns of the crescent-shaped moon.

ll. 1012-1017. This passage is full of reminiscences of Shakespeare. We are, for example, reminded of Oberon's 'Swifter than the wandering moon' in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and of 'corner of the moon' in *Macbeth*.

l. 1018. *Mortals.....Virtue* : It is by virtue alone that mortals can attain to the spiritual freedom which the Attendant Spirit enjoys.

ll. 1020-1021. *She can.....chime* : virtue alone can teach you how to ascend to the true heaven. Cf. Jonson's Song to Virtue :

" Though a stranger here on earth  
In heaven she hath her right of birth ;  
There, there is virtue's seat :  
Strive to keep her your own ;  
'Tis only she can make you great,  
Though place here make you known."

l. 1021. *sphery chime* : The music of the spheres.

*To climb.....chime* : " To ascend beyond the spheres into the empyrean or true heaven—the abode of God and purest Spirits."

l. 1022-1023. *If virtue.....her* : These two lines set down the motto of Milton's life and express the central spirit of *Comus*. Among English poets, this is the spirit of Milton alone. This is the triumphant expression of the poet's confidence in the unassailable strength of virtue, when helped by Divine Providence. No more fitting conclusion to the masque can be imagined. Verity remarks : " The peaceful close of *Comus* is characteristic of Milton. All his long poems end quietly. Indeed, the end of *Paradise Lost* is so simple that some critics proposed, wrongly, to omit that last couplet as unauthentic because tame and less impressive than the two previous lines. But it is just like the gentle ending of *Paradise Regained*. Shakespeare's tragedies usually close on quiet note."

